Crosstreams II
West

CROSS STREAMS

Issue #2 **May, 1994.**

Contents

Editorial ..... page 3

Death & Mrs Collins.....by Cathy Lyn Goodwin .....page 4

Boomer Adams.....by Shayne McCormack ..... page 11

Final Moments .....by Susan Clarke ..... page 19

The Leap Into Print.....by Susan Clarke ..... page 29

Matilda .....by Sue Bursztynski & Susan Clarke..... page 31

A Secretary's Woes.....by Jenny McLean..... page 63

Good Knight, Sweet Prince .....by Susan Clarke ..... page 65

Madness In The Blood.....by Shayne McCormack..... page 75

Shades of Grey.....by Timmothy Clarke ..... page 79

Binding Ties.....by Cathy Lyn Goodwin ..... page 88

Letter Column ..... page 95

Cover Art

Michelle West

Other Art

Adrienne Losin & Shayne McCormack

Typed

Helen Small & Susan Clarke

©1994 Clarke & Keating Ink, 6 Bellevue Road, Faulconbridge, NSW 2776, Australia.

TO BOLDLY GO
WHERE NO ROO
HAS GONE BEFORE...
AUSTRALIAN SPACE SERVICE
ALOSIN '94

EDITORIAL:

This is the part of the magazine where the editors are supposed to be witty, entertaining and intelligent all at once. This, of course, is a Great Myth put out by the Fanzine Editors Guild to make fanzine readers feel totally inadequate in the light of that much brilliance.

It doesn't always work out that way.

Sometimes an editor (or two in our case) really pushes themselves to get an issue out for a special event (such as Media*West*Con) and is so exhausted by the time this part of the zine comes along there is no way they can find anything really entertaining or frightfully witty to say and their intelligence went to bed without them. Such is the case right now.

It is now Sunday night. We've still to correllate the voting of the FanQ's that have come in this week, do the "doo-hickies" at the end of stories that Joanne really excels in, gather together addresses and phone numbers to take with her, do up the new ad for the convention since we decided that yes, we could put out one more magazine before Joanne leaves at 9.00 am in the morning on Tuesday...

At least it got me motivated enough to put the finishing touches to the two stories that I did for the issue. Pressure goes a long way with me. Now all I have to do is 36 pages of three stories by Thursday for class, and Bob's-yer-uncle, Mate.

Now, if you are at Media*West*Con reading this, you can go ask Joanne or Ian or Shayne what that particular expression means. And at this hour of the night, be thankful I didn't say "Moomba" instead. Yes, there will be an Aussie fan party during the course of the weekend. I expect everyone to lift their glasses remembering this little Aussie left behind (working on her thesis for her MA in writing). I'll miss you all.

Now, enough of the entertaining editorial, this is the issue: Thank you to everyone who contributed. Jenny McLean for her short **Simon & Simon** piece and Cathy Lyn Goodwin for both her **Hawaii Five-O** (Book 'em Danno) stories. Not forgetting Shayne McCormack who rang up and offered the **12 O'Clock High** story at the last minute, then included the **Vampire article**. It was very apt as it turned out.

Not long ago, I ran away from home. The children will tell you that just because they went on holidays with their father, I closed up the house, handed the keys over to a neighbour (whom the dog promptly bailed up every time she tried to feed her!) and ran down to the Bursztynski clan for comfort and succour. Of course, because it is traditional now, Sue B and I sat down and wrote a story together. (We do it <u>every</u> time we meet) We wrote it over breakfast, on trams, buses, at railway stations, and at the airport as my plane was boarding... but we wrote it nonetheless. We started to think about what would happen when myth, and history were intermingled and produced Matilda. This is a story for both **Robin Hood** afficianados and **Robin of Sherwood** readers.

And then there's Tim's story. Readers of the last issue will realise that Tim intermingles media characters with ones of his own creation to create quite readable adventures. In this story he does it with **Quantum Leap**, **Red Dwarf**, **Forever Knight**, and **The Attack of the Killer Tomatoes.** He had to do a great deal of research (so he said as he watched all available video tapes...) for this story. Enjoy.

My stories I've left until last. What can you say about your own work. My interest this time has been primarily **Quantum Leap** - There's an article about the written material available, and how Sam meets **Elvis** again --- not to mention the one with **Forever Knight** as well. I hope you enjoy them.

DEATH & MR COLLINS

By Cathy Lynn Goodwin

Steve McGarrett slammed the phone down and visibly brought his temper back under control before glancing across to his long-time assistant Danny Williams, who was perched on the arm of the chair with arms folded. Williams, from long experience, read the other's mind, and got to his feet.

"I'll get over there and see if I can't move them along a bit." McGarrett nodded and allowed the anger to finally fade from his face.

"Thanks, Danno. If they give you any trouble, call me."

As the younger man left, McGarrett slumped wearily into his chair and fingered the casebook which lay open on the desk. The Kahala investigation was starting to drag, and he was finding it increasingly difficult to get the goods on the man. Leads were petering out to nothing, and so far their informants had failed to provide the vital information needed to put him away. The case was consuming far too much time.

The hour was getting late and McGarrett was bone-tired. He thought, briefly, of stretching out on the couch, but he knew if he did that he'd be out for hours, and *that* he simply couldn't afford. He then considered yet another coffee, but doubted he could manage it. He was full of coffee.

Leaving aside the casebook and its headaches, he stood to stretch taut muscles and viewed the night-time scene through the slats of the window-blinds, only to return restlessly to the desk. McGarrett reached for the telex float file which had been brought in for him hours earlier. As head of Hawaii Five-O, he made it a point to keep himself abreast of any major crime-related incident which had occurred nationally and internationally, and to that end he was determined to get through it. Half asleep, his mind on other things, he flicked through the fresh folios issued regularly by the various police and enforcement agencies, without much real interest. In fact, he'd gone past the item before it registered. Suddenly awake, McGarrett backtracked a page or two.

As he read, all the colour drained from his face and his jaw dropped. He took on an expression of sudden pain until, finally dropping the file, he rose from the chair and left the office. He walked past his secretary, Jenny, without so much as a by-your-leave. Jenny called after him as he disappeared through the open outer door, but he either didn't hear or simply ignored her.

Danny Williams returned to the office two hours later to find a concerned secretary waiting for him. Jenny told him what had happened and followed him as he went into the main office. Steve's tie, jacket and service revolver in its holster were still neatly arranged on the apparel stand. Wherever he'd gone, it certainly wasn't on business. Danny recalled that Steve had been in shirt-sleeves, and that meant the boss was going to make it another late night session. On those lines, he looked to the desk for a clue and wasn't disappointed. The file had been dropped open in an untidy manner alien to Steve's habits, so he picked it up to scan the folios. He read:

> From BTNLA
> To HBTNLA
>
> LAPD circular 66: 8.22.69 0654hrs. Body of FM Caucasian approx 30-36 years found dumped in roadside ditch. Cause of death G.S.W. to back of head. Suspect gangland connection. FM I.D. as Nicole Wylie. Witness protection plan suspended at own request. Five-O protective custody until completion of Ravasco trial, resulting in conviction. No suspects. Inquiries continuing.
>
> TT45

Danny's jaw muscles tightened at the news. Nicole Wylie dead; murdered by a bullet to the head, obviously execution style. It explained a great deal.

Nicole had been Ravasco's girl, and the only witness to a murder. Underworld Boss Lee Ravasco had killed Joe Harvey at a hotel, and, afraid for her safety, Nicole had run before Five-O could pick her up. To track her down, Ravasco had sent one of his hoods, a guy named Victor, with orders to kill her on sight. Victor found Nicole living in Singapore, and after a close shave, the almost hysterical woman had turned to the only man who could help her - Steve McGarrett.

A terrified phone call had brought Steve to her aid, but her extradition had gone terribly wrong, and all Danny knew about it was that they'd shared a rough time of it, getting back by their wits, dodging the local law *and* Ravasco's trailing hit men. Somehow they'd come through the ordeal, and Nicole's testimony had put Ravasco away. And now Nicole was dead: had Ravasco exacted a final revenge?

✷ ✷ ✷

The beachside bungalow had been used on numerous occasions. It was like a hundred other similar dwellings on the coast. Unobtrusive, seemingly simplistic and isolated enough to maintain security. Inside were all the latest creature comforts to make the thing bearable. Nicole Wylie had spent two weeks here during the Ravasco trial in tight protective custody: twenty-four hour guard for the duration. Joyce Bennett, HPD's best woman detective, had been assigned to the case, and with her on the job there had been no problems.

Danny himself had put in time at the beach-house; during the day mostly, while Chin or Kono guarded the night. Steve too, was in close personal contact during the period, picking Nicole up for her daily court appearance, and delivering her safely back again.

Steve had so far not revealed the details of his and Nicole's four-day ordeal and escape from Singapore, but Danny had seen for himself that whenever they were together his whole bearing changed. It was as if no one else existed and there was just the two of them. Her expression in his company was also very revealing, but she kept her secrets. When the trial was finally over, Nicole came to the decision to return to the mainland only after Steve's insistence. Ironically, he felt she would be safer there, away from Ravasco's remaining henchmen and any possible retaliation. Steve himself had been more aloof than usual following her departure.

The bungalow seemed the likely place to start.

The headlights raked the black sturdy form of the Mercury as Danny turned off the road. Steve had simply pushed the auto between two palm trees into the soft sand, and abandoned it. Danny got out, walked over to the Mercury, took the keys from the ignition and closed the door noiselessly. The night was humid and still, and by the brilliant light of a full moon, he made his way to the house.

Danny found Steve sitting on the steps leading off the porch, staring absently out to sea. Still in shirt-sleeves, McGarrett now looked a little worse for wear.

"Steve?" Danny kept his voice low, a little reluctant to disturb the man.

The other turned at his name and glanced at him briefly. He didn't seem at all surprised, despite his question. "Danno. What made you look for me here?"

"I read the telex. Seemed the logical choice. About Nicole ... I'm sorry." Danny was genuinely concerned.

McGarrett nodded silently. Danny sat next to him and waited expectantly. Steve would either talk or send him packing. Something told him Steve wanted to talk. he was suddenly reminded of the night Steve had learnt the news of his nephew's death, and his frank willingness to talk, and to reveal his true feelings which he usually guarded religiously.

The story finally came.

Steve had gone to Singapore believing he had the full co-operation of the local force and his contact, Inspector Fong, had assigned to him a car and police driver. Steve then set out to bring Nicole legally back to Hawaii, but Ravasco's connections were long, as Steve was soon to find out.

He'd told Nicole to stay in her apartment and admit no one until he had arrived, but she had been forced to flee, abandoning everything. She managed to get him a message to meet her at a local bar. Their first meeting had been stormy, distrustful, suspicious in their traditional roles of cop and gangster's girlfriend. However, once the ice was broken, he could see she was a desperate woman needing his help.

When they tried to leave the bar, they found themselves in deep trouble. Inspector Fong and the driver cornered them at the backstairs to the alley. Fong had accepted contract money apparently, and intended to kill them then and there. Steve had reacted quickly, seized the driver as a shield and shot Fong as the Inspector fired. It was a hell of a situation.

He could have tried to explain to the authorities, but it would have taken time to clear up the mess, too much time in which Nicole's life could have been compromised, and his main priority was her safety. While deciding what to do next, they heard sirens, so they took to the streets ... fugitives.

Steve now found himself in the unfamiliar and unwanted position of dodging the law, and to top it all off, his ID wallet and cash had been lost in the struggle. Fortunately, Nicole had had the forethought to have a few hundred dollars in her possession. They needed wheels to get away and this forced Steve to become a thief. He hot-wired and stole a car from a garage. Realising Ravasco's men would be watching the airport, he headed for the docks. Even then they were followed, but Steve managed to lose the tail.

He secured a passage for himself and Nicole on the first ship out. The freighter JEREMY BAY was bound for the Philippines. They were to travel under the guise of Mr and Mrs Collins. Even the ship wasn't safe, though. Ravasco had placed a hitman aboard during the stop-over in Singora. Steve had become aware of this when in the radio shack to send Danny a cablegram. As a former Naval officer, he was able to read the Morse the 'Sparkes' was sending at the time. It concerned the terms of a coded contract to eliminate both himself and Nicole, and the message originated from someone aboard the ship - one of their fellow passengers.

Reluctantly he informed Nicole of their predicament. He didn't want her to worry, but she took it in her stride.

It didn't take long for the assailant to strike. That night, out on deck, Steve was set upon, struck down and almost pitched over the side. Nicole's scream had distracted the man long enough for Steve to fight his way back aboard and in doing so tossed his attacker over the rail. The man disappeared beneath the waves. The clerical collar in Steve's hand told him it had been the Reverend Holloway, someone neither of them expected.

Nicole had thought Steve had been lost and was hysterical. He had to calm her down in the cabin and that's when it happened. She'd kissed him, and as much as he wanted to respond to her advances, he knew this was neither the time nor the place. It had been

with an effort of will to push her gently away from him. There was also the unspoken reluctance to get involved. Maybe later. Maybe.

To Steve it was obvious Ravasco's men would be waiting for them at Manila when they docked, so they would have to disembark before then.

When Chin Ho questioned the second officer after the JEREMY BAY docked, he found that the Collinses had gone ashore at Lingayen earlier when the ship had anchored only briefly to offload. A message from Steve via the Harbour Master had asked him to meet them at the shrine just outside Santa Christina. Chin wasn't to know that Victor had overheard this.

Steve and Nicole had caught a lift from a friendly vegetable grower, and although the back of the truck was windy and noisy, it had been comfortable enough, and they'd reached the shrine without incident.

They walked into an ambush, however. Victor and two henchmen had been waiting, and opened fire almost immediately. Steve and Nicole were forced to take cover that was less than ideal. Steve returned fire, but his ammo was limited, nevertheless he got one of them. Fortunately, just like the cavalry, Chin and three local policemen arrived in time and the situation was resolved. Victor had gotten away, however. For Steve and Nicole, it had been a close-run thing.

A smile caught the corners of Steve's mouth as he recalled something of obvious amusement.

"I asked her, when it was all over, what I could get her for our fourth day anniversary. All she wanted was a hot shower and a cold drink." He paused, wiped a hand across his mouth, and continued. "She had a lot of guts ... She stood up to whatever they threw at her. She was stronger than she knew."

He got to his feet then, and leaned an arm against the post. "The last time I saw her, she was framed in the door of the plane, waving goodbye, pretty as a picture."

Steve didn't mention the letter. It had arrived only this week. Nicole's handwriting had been small and neat. It began simply enough, again thanking him for his help and recalling one or two incidents that they'd shared. Then she'd gone on to say how she felt about returning to LA; that it no longer felt like home. Nicole had explained why she'd decided to withdraw from the witness protection programme. Her reasons stemmed from the conversation they had on the back of the truck on the way to the shrine. She had stopped running, she said, by putting Ravasco behind bars, and because she had made one stand, her first stand, she would not hide now.

And then the tone of the letter changed abruptly. She spoke openly about her feelings for him, and the urgency of her words made it clear she was sure. Her request to see him

again sounded like a plea, and yet, conscious of his position and cautious, she was prepared to leave it up to him. Nicole had signed the letter: "All my love, Mrs Collins".

Gazing off into the distance, now suggesting the hint of the dawn to come, McGarrett thought aloud.

"I sometimes think this job demands far too much of us. What kind of life can you build when you have to work day and night sometimes for weeks at a time?"

Danny knew all too well how true that was, as did Chin and Kono. Moreso for Chin, with his large family - a part-time father.

Steve went on. "One too many dates stood up once too often ... the reluctance to get too close to someone so they don't get hurt, expose them to some hood or other on a revenge trip."

Danny let him talk without interruption, but he found himself thinking that it was the first time he'd heard him voice any doubts. He hadn't realised that Nicole's death had hit him so hard. Maybe there had been more to the relationship than he knew.

"I had to get out of there," Steve explained, frankly. "It suddenly felt claustrophobic, and I realised I spend so much more time in the office than I ever do at home."

They stood there in the familiar silence of the dawn, watching the pale pink sun rise above the calm waters. Danny felt the depressed mood keenly and, thinking of an all-night dive he knew, suggested, "Come on, Steve, I'll buy you a drink."

But McGarrett's mind had picked up on other threads, and he turned, his eyes determined.

"Something you said yesterday, about underworld bosses tending to frequent the same clubs ... Kahala's a friend of Ravasco, isn't he?"

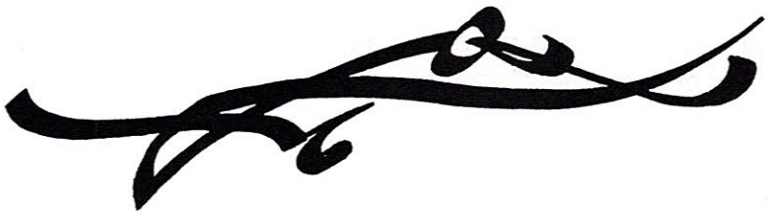
Danny nodded; he'd not considered that until now. There had been a good chance to nail one of the biggest hoods on the island, but the investigation was flagging, dragging energy and enthusiasm with it, as you began to feel as if you were simply bashing your head against a brick wall - even Steve had been showing signs of raw nerves - and then the news of Nicole's death. It seemed, now that he was over the shock, the anger had heightened his resolve.

Steve turned and was walking, with a purposeful stride, to his car, then stopped and swung back to Danny, who hadn't moved.

"Well, come on, there's work to be done. I want Kahala; I want him bad. *And* I'm going to get him."

Danny smiled and tossed his boss the keys to the Mercury. He knew as he passed him that that's precisely what he would do, even if it took a little time and more sleepless nights.

McGarrett glanced once more at the house. Nicole had left the decision up to him. It was one he would never have to make.



Contributions Needed: Clarke & Keating are putting out yet more zines. We are presently looking for stories and artwork in the following media: Simon & Simon (Double Play), Star Trek, Star Trek: The Next Generation, Deep Space Nine (Beyond Antares), Babylon Five, Blake's Seven (Chronicles), Battlestar Galactica (Blue Squadron Journal), The Professionals (Backtrack) and just about any other media story for Cross Streams. These must be of a general nature (no slash stuff). However, we will accept adult fiction (including slash fiction) for the following magazines: Beyond Antares R-Rated (Star Trek in all forms), Down Under Express (The Professionals), Blake's Seven: The Other Side (Blake's Seven) and The Alien Connection (all other media).
All written contributions should be typed - hard copy or 3.5 in disk - and include a stamped self-addressed envelope. Artwork should be good photocopies of the work.
No contribution will be return unless requested.
Write to: Susan Clarke or Joanne Keating, 6 Bellevue Road, Faulconbridge, NSW 2776, Australia for further details.

BOOMER ADAMS

by Shayne McCormack

Boomer Adams' best friend had warned him about the weather in England.

"It rains all the time, mate. I heard you can sleep through summer if you aren't careful. You better take your Dryzabone. Trust me!"

Well, Stinger Williams had been right. Since the moment he stepped off the transport bringing him to England, it hadn't stopped raining. All the way from London to Archbury on the train, it had rained, and when he got off to find all the taxis gone, he's wished he'd listened to Stinger. One of the locals had given him directions; the field was a couple of miles outside town, easy walking distance to a boy from the bush, except for the rain.

By the time he'd gone half a mile, he was drenched. It didn't worry him too much, except when it got in his shoes, making his socks rub. With the weary patience born of a lifetime's experience, he put his head down, pulled his hat further over his face and trudged on.

The final indignity was when the car drove by him, flinging mud up against his trousers. He stopped, took his hat off and threw it on the ground.

"Bloody hell! Why don't you watch where you're going!"

The car stopped, then reversed. When it reached him, the window was wound down and a deep, dry voice spoke from within.

"Are you heading for the 918th, soldier?"

Boomer recognised the Voice of Command. He picked up his hat and put on his head, mud and all.

"Yes, sir. I'm reporting in."

The door was pushed open. "Get in... and try and keep that mud to yourself."

Boomer climbed into the car, dumping his bag onto the floor. Closing the door, he settled back, then squeezed sideways so as not to dirty the uniform of the officer next to him. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face before turning to thank... the General.

Being an observant young man, Boomer was immediately aware of a pair of deeply set eyes studying him with the natural authority of a hawk. The single star on the shoulder pad told him all he needed to know. He snapped a salute to his new commanding officer.

"General."

General Frank Savage returned the salute. "And you are...?"

"Captain Robert Adams, sir."

Frank settled back, took out his cigarette holder and offered one to Boomer, who shook his head. "Don't smoke, sir. Never picked up the habit."

The General lit his cigarette and studied his newest pilot through the climbing haze of smoke. "Just what sort of accent is that, Captain?"

Boomer was all too accustomed to that question. "It's an Aussie.... that is, Australian accent, sir."

The General was obviously a man accustomed to controlling his emotions; most people were puzzled right off by that answer, coming from someone wearing the brown and green of the US Army Air Force. Tapping his ash into the door ashtray, the General continued to watch him as he spoke again.

"Australian. What is an Australian doing flying for the United States?"

"I have dual citizenship - my parents are American, but I was born in Australia, spent most of my life there. They were the representatives of an aircraft company. They imported aircraft and parts to Australia for use in the bush. I guess they just grew to love the place so much they sort of stayed on." Boomer grinned at the memory of his early life buzzing sheep in the far west of New South Wales. "I was flying before I could get a car driving license. It's sort of in the blood."

"I see." The General didn't give a bloke too many clues as to how he was reacting to the things a man said; Boomer didn't know whether he was pleased or bored. "Well, I can always use a good pilot. Your crew is inexperienced, only your flight Engineer is an old hand. Major Stovall, my Ground Exec, will go through the necessary signing in procedures with you and get you settled in." The General leant forward to talk to the driver, instructing him to drop Boomer off at the Group's office.

"You'll have a day or two to settle in, by the looks of this weather." The General peered up at the grey, sodden sky - Boomer wondered irreverently how the rain dared keep falling when General Savage stared at it like that. He had an idea his new boss was a man of some will and determination. Climbing out of the car, he grabbed his bag, saluted, thanked the General for the ride, and headed inside to report for duty.

The procedures completed, Boomer was shown to his quarters where he had a shower and changed into a dry uniform, dropping his clothing off at the laundry to be cleaned. His next stop was the Officer's Mess. He didn't smoke, but he appreciated a beer and a cold one would go down real well.

Many of the officers had obviously taken a day or two's leave to take advantage of the weather, but the Mess was still relatively packed. The fire was on, the air was smoky and the piano was being played with enthusiasm, if not a lot of skill. Boomer parked his butt on an empty bar stool and waved at the bartender. The man gave him a friendly grin as he carried on the time-honoured tradition of wiping glasses with a white towel. "What can I get you, Captain?"

"A cold beer, mate, if you've got one. And get ready to refill, 'cause one won't touch the sides."

The officers perched on either side of him swivelled to face him at the sound of his voice. One, a Captain with blond hair and a moustache, studied him with blue-eyed fascination. The other, a red haired, freckled Lieutenant, leant forward and squinted at his uniform.

"Well, it looks American, but it don't talk American. 'Course, the scotch could have gone to my head." He peered up at Boomer. "Say something, will ya!"

Boomer put one hand to his chest, and began reciting an extremely dirty poem. The Captain slapped his hand over Boomer's mouth.

"Sheet! I know the next verse, don't say it... this is a Christian establishment."

Boomer grinned and took a swallow of his beer. "Are you sure? It's got somethin' to do with sheep..."

Lieutenant Gordon "Ginger" Padgett slapped the bar. "Now, P.J., I haven't heard the rest of that poem, you should let the man talk. But I have to know... what State are you from, fella?"

Boomer grinned, and took a swig of beer. "A very southern state. It's called Australia. Heard of it?"

A number of other officers gathered around the bar to view the wonder from Down Under. Ginger frowned in thought.

"I didn't think foreigners could join the US forces. How come you got in?"

"Because my mum and dad are Americans. I was born in Australia of good American stock. But I was in California studying when the war broke out. So I just naturally offered the Army Air Corps my services." He looked around the ring of friendly, curious faces, and shrugged. "I always liked flying."

"Well," said Ginger, "You picked the right place. They seem to do a right lot of that, over some real nasty, violent places. Me, I'm a southern boy too. From a little town outside Charlottesville, Virginia. My friends call me Ginger. What about you.... you got a nickname, Captain?"

"Sure. You can all call me Boomer."

Ginger looked puzzled. "What's a boomer?"

"A bloody great big kangaroo. A big red boomer can jump over the moon, kick like a bull and punch out a boxer. And," finished Boomer with a grin, "he's a real friendly fella 'less you try shooting at him."

It was a stroke of good luck for Boomer, meeting Ginger as he had, because Ginger was his co-pilot, the first of his crew he was to meet. Being two country boys they had a lot in common, were both flying mad and had similar easy going natures. Before they went to their quarters that night the two of them, a little unsteady from a few too many beers, donned slickers and went out to the hardstands.

Parked at the end of a row of B17s was a brand new plane. Unlike the others in the row, it had no name pained on its nose, but the number matched that on Boomer's squadron duty allocation form. The two men stood looking up at the bomber's nose, its perspex glistening in the rain, and Ginger looked across at Boomer.

"So what are you gonna call her, Boomer?"

"What am I gonna call her? How come I get to name her?"

"Because, Captain Robert Adams, you're the pilot, you pick the name." Ginger steadied himself against the bomber's wheel, patting the wheel strut affectionately. "It's a right important thing, naming your plane. Has to mean something."

Boomer studied the shape above him, outlined in a halo of wet moonlight. "Alright then. We'll call her the Waltzing Matilda. And paint a big red boomer on her, with wings. So she can jump over the Nazis and kick 'em to death with her big feet."

* * *

Boomer was introduced to the rest of his crew the following morning after breakfast. Sergeant Gary Clarke, his flight engineer, was a number of years older than Boomer, and could have been a problem. But the Sergeant was from Texas, was as stolid and reliable as a rock and seemed to know how to handle young Captains with their first command. He offered advice but never in a way that made said Captains feel they were being hustled. And he introduced the enlisted men, telling his aircraft commander the little that he knew about each. As they passed the Group offices, Boomer asked another pertinent question.

"I met General Savage last night. He seems... cool headed." Boomer watched the Sergeant from the corner of his eye; it was always a little dangerous asking enlisted men about superior officers, but Clarke was the only man he knew who had flown in the General's command.

The Sergeant smiled mildly. "The General is a very cool man, Captain. Hard, but fair, is the usual description. Do wrong by him and he'll blister your tail, but give him your best and he'll appreciate it. I think he's the best commander in the Eighth Air Force." As if suddenly uncomfortable, the Sergeant begged to be excused, and went about his Sergeantly business.

He had already met Ginger, who called the other officers together for breakfast. Lieutenant Grant McLean, his Navigator, was Boston born and bred, and seemed a touch snooty to Boomer. Lieutenant Samuel Bartholomew, his bombardier, was a short, feisty character from Hawaii who chewed gum constantly, swore like a trooper and had one of the best accuracy records of his class. He told them all at their first crew session the name he's chosen for the aircraft; everyone but Grant McLean seemed happy with it. Boomer decided to ignore McLean's less than joyful response; sometimes you had to accept that it wasn't possible to please all of the people all of the time. But McLean would have to get used to him and his ways, not the other way around. There was only one boss on the aircraft, and that was him. A B17 wasn't a democracy.

And later that day, he also met his maintenance crew, with an introduction by Sergeant Clerk to his crew chief, Sergeant Harvey "Boss" Maddox. Maddox was a big bull of a man, gruff with a dry, sarcastic manner. But Clark told Boomer that there wasn't a better wrench bender in the whole group, that they were real lucky to have him looking after Matilda.

There were so many names and faces to remember, and Boomer had never been that good at remembering names. He took to making notes in a little pocket book, as he had when he'd started at some new school as a kid. It helped, he found, to write the names down. He also started getting acquainted with the other pilots of his squadron, and his direct lord, Major Joe Cobb.

The pattern of blending into the group had begun.

With typical English predicability, the next day dawned clear and fresh, at least over the airfield. The storm front had drifted east to cover most of Europe, and the Group had at least a day's rest in front of them.

Except for the new birds in the nest. Boomer and two other new pilots were put onto practice flights, rehearsing flying in formation and exercising their gunners. None of it was new to Boomer, of course. They'd done it many times at Flight School. But there was an extra thrill in it for him now; the aircraft alongside him were part of his own group and the lead plane was the General's own plane, the Piccadilly Lily, piloted that day by Major Cobb.

Cobb drove them hard, having them take different places in the formation, to swap position on turns and dives - which meant throttling the four big engines up and down to delicately weave his wings through the formation. He came into formation from above, from below, dropped back and went forward. But he didn't mind, no matter how Ginger bitched. It was all part of the process, and it helped him get the feel of the Matilda.

They swapped control. He pretended he was out of it so as to test Ginger's handling. He did it well enough; a little less sure and deft, but well trained and not unconfident. Then the gunners had their turns when the target plane pulling its long drone behind it, came into view. The results, while not spectacular, were acceptable.

A second day of exercises covered practice navigation and bombing. McLean's navigation was accurate and Sam Bartholomew hit the target with near pinpoint accuracy. Given the time, Boomer knew he could meld his crew into a formidable team.

That evening practice stopped. The Toby mug on the shelf above the Officer's Mess' fire was turned to indicate a mission the following day, and the Matilda was listed as being operational. Joe Cobb took Boomer aside after dinner to explain.

"I would have liked to have given you a couple of more days, Boomer," he said, topping up Boomer's coffee cup, "but General Crowe had called for a maximum effort. He wants everything that can fly up there. So you and the other fledglings get thrown in straight off. You just do it right, and you'll be fine."

Boomer added sugar and milk to the coffee and stirred it, looking across at the older man thoughtfully. "Sounds like a big one. Have you got any advice you'd like to give this new chicken?"

Cobb grinned. "Yes. Don't get your arse shot up. Other than that, get your plane to the target, drop your bombs in the right place and get it back."

Boomer grinned. "Well, when you say it like that, it sounds real simple."

Breakfast was not an easy meal. He tried to eat a full meal but the food made his nervous stomach twitch, and he stuck to coffee and toast, deciding to take some tea in a thermos, to have later. He watched Ginger tucking into the scrambled eggs and shook his head.

"My boy, you have a cast iron stomach. I couldn't eat that right now if my life depended on it."

Ginger shrugged as he swallowed a full mouth of egg. "Always been a hearty eater, comes from being in a big family. You dig in or you don't get."

After breakfast, at the briefing, General Savage gave them the bad news. He tapped the big map of Europe with his long pointer, and the tip of the pointer rested at the end of a ribbon that stretched from Archbury to the centre of Germany.

"The target is Schweinfurt. All available aircraft of the 8th Air Force will be taking part, which amounts to around 500 planes. The main target is the ballbearing plant, and the 918th is the lead group. I will be flying lead the aircraft, call sign Bluebird 1." He turned to indicate the secondary

board, showing the squadron formation; Boomer noticed that the Matilda was listed as Blackbird 3, and that the Blackbird group was set right in the centre of the group. It would be the safest place in the sky, and he looked across at the General, who was handing over the stage to Cobb, with a silent word of thanks. He and the boys were being given the best chance of surviving the day.

Savage saw him and stepped down to talk to him as the Navigators went to collect their data, answering his salute.

"Morning, Captain. All dried out yet?"

"G'day, sir. Yep, I sure am."

Frank gave his youngest commander a mild smile. "You'll see I've put you in the centre of the group, Captain. This is a bad one for you to start off with but when General Crowe says maximum effort, he means everyone. Are you happy with the way your crew are shaping up?"

"Yes, sir, a good bunch. Lieutenant Bart tells me I only gotta get him there and he'll goose those fellas right in their smoke stacks. He's got a real sharp eye for that bombsight," Boomer finished, looking at his bombardier bent over the sight table, "so I'm pretty sure he'll do alright."

Boomer saw the General was watching him carefully, judging him, he guessed, to see how he'd go. Just the way old Bert Higgins, the racehorse trainer, had looked at a likely two year-old doing morning work outs at Warwick Farm in Sydney. Using his practised eye to judge whether the horse was sound, if it had the wind and leg to make the mile. *He's wonderin' whether I've got what it takes to get a plane and nine men from here to Germany, drop the bombs and get us all back alive. It's a good question, General Frank. I dunno either...* In that moment he felt an odd affinity for the man in front of him. General Savage had immense experience, had done this many times, and Boomer had never done it. But they had both faced the moment, the first morning of putting everything on the line. They were both pilots.

"Yes," he said, nodding. "We'll all do fine." *I hope...*

* * *

Their fighter protection left them over France, and from then on they were on their own; five hundred bombers loaded with bombs and fuel and five thousand men. Four thousand, nine hundred and ninety nine Americans and one lonely Aussie/American who'd discovered that fear was a very lonely emotion. You could share a smile, and even a misery, but fear you kept to yourself. Especially when you were the commander of a bomber, expected to show a calm, unflappable face to your men.

The British had put on a couple of diversion attacks which had drawn off a substantial number of fighter squadrons from their path, buy as they got closer to Germany these diversions had less effect. The huge formation was savaged with increasing fury until the air was patterned with the traces of dozens of fighters. And B17s began falling out of the sky.

After a while, the fear just blended into one long numb misery, like a tooth being drawn very slowly from his jaw. He saw a B17 with its tail blown off, dropping down out of the sky like some gigantic autumn leaf, fluttering and spinning down, its crew leaping out on the tiny white puffs of their parachutes. Another bomber staggered out of formation half a mile away, its right wing ablaze as both its starboard engines caught fire. The wing exploded and the bomber turned over on its back, making it impossible for the crew to get out. The bomber fell, taking her men with her.

Although she was in the middle of the pack, the Matilda came in for her own mauling. FW190s swept through the group. trying to get behind the bombers for the best angle rear shots, and one or two tried their luck at the Bluebird formation. Some holes were punched through the Matilda's wings and there were a few strikes at the fuselage, but nobody was hit by fighter fire.

And then the fighters faded away to land, refuel and rearm and the anti-aircraft took over. He had heard tales of flak so bad that it looked solid enough to walk on, but'd thought such things were stories to scare the new kids with. But in the skies over Germany that day, he flew his aircraft through a near-solid wall of metal; the bomber shivered as the explosions shook the air into turbulence all around him. Aircraft were increasingly struck, and he saw planes going down around him with smoke pouring from their engines, with wings shattered, noses blown away. The fighters had been bad enough, but his gunners could fire back at those. The flak they could only endure.

Time distorted, reality faded in and out in a haze of fear and noise and death. The Matilda shook sickeningly from near misses and Boomer grew more tired with each passing minute. It was a nearly impossible task, to guide the plane through the flak, to keep his position in the formation; his arms and hands ached from the jarring, his head buzzed and his eyes were red with the strain. It was with a sort of dumb pleasure that he heard his navigator telling him they were at the IP; he looked over and saw the Picadilly Lily swinging toward the target, followed in astonishingly precise order by the rest of the group. He put the Matilda into the slot, at the correct altitude and heading, then switched control over to the bombardier. For a few minutes he had nothing to do but pray they dropped their load in the right place and that the General would some how get them out of there alive...

He felt the Matilda jump at the same moment as Sam's excited voice came over the intercom.

"Bombs gone, skipper! You've got her back."

Boomer took hold of the yoke and pushed his mike with his chin. "How does it look, Sam?"

There was a moment's silence, then Sam Answered. "It's rainin' ballbearings down there, I guess. Can we go home now, Boomer?"

As if in answer, General Savage's calm voice came into his earphones.

"Blackbird one to all Birds. Well done, all. Let's go home." The lead squadron turned to 265 and soon the survivors of the second Schweinfurt raid were heading back towards England.

As if enraged by the bombing (which they probably had a right to be, Boomer reflected) the flak was even more hideous going out, if that was possible. More holes peppered the Matilda's body, and they once more had to run the gauntlet of fighters heading back towards the Channel. Boomer lost count of how many B17s he saw going down... the sky was black with smoke. It was a cold and bitter victory.

After a day spent away, they finally made it back to Archbury, and then had to circle while the aircraft with wounded landed first. When it was finally their turn, Boomer dropped down towards the ground and felt the wheels touch the runway with weary relief. He taxied the Matilda to her hardstand on two engines, then cut the last two, sitting there for some moments as the motor sounds faded and the propellers slowed to a stop. He turned to look at Ginger, smiled tiredly at his weary, red-eyed co-pilot.

"Jeeze, that was awful. It's gotta get better after this... I dunno how it could get worse!"

Ginger finished closing down the systems, then unclipped himself and pulled off his cap. "I'll drink to that, as soon as humanly possible. Let's get to Interrogation and make our reports so we hit the Mess before it's crowded out. I'll let you buy the first one."

As they crawled through to the hatch and dropped down out of the aircraft's belly, they found the rest of the crew waiting by the jeep. Climbing aboard, Boomer took the wheel and drove across the tarmac.

When they'd finished making their reports, the crew split up, with the officers heading for the Mess. After a couple of weak English beers, Boomer felt considerably better; he and Ginger parked themselves in a corner out of the way of the noisy crowd around them.

Ginger stared at the half-filled glass of scotch and yawned. "Lord, I'm weary... I feel like every moving part in my poor ol' body is stretched right out o' shape." He looked up at Boomer with a tired grin. "But you look okay. I guess it weren't too bad, though that humming did get to be a..."

"Humming," Boomer frowned. "What humming?"

Ginger looked at Boomer, puzzled. "All the way in to the drop you were humming... don't you remember? It went like this..." Ginger hummed a few bars and Boomer blinked.

"That's 'Waltzing Matilda'! I don't remember that! Are you sure?"

Ginger nodded, grinning. "No way will I ever forget that. So, you don't even remember...? How about that! Wait'll I tell the boys..."

"No, don't tell them." Boomer was too tired to consider it right then, but it sounded like the sort of crazy thing he'd do, in a pinch. "I don't want them to think their pilot's a dimwit. I s'pose I was sort of thinking of other things..."

Ginger nodded, sipping his scotch. "Sure, I get it. So was I, cobber, so was I..."

Boomer never could recall singing while they bombed Schweinfurt that first time. But aircrew are a superstitious bunch and it became a tradition to be carried on, that he hummed that bloody song as they lined up on the target. It was only that first torrid, murderous time, when the 8th Air Force lost sixty bombers in one raid, that he could never remember singing it....

FINAL MOMENTS

By Susan Clarke

He put the bottle back slowly, feeling the cotton wool wrapping that had started to encircle his head finally cover it completely. Sharp sprinkles of light danced before his eyes disorienting him further as if forewarning a migraine. Automatically he searched the shelves, even as he staggered, trying to find something to help.

How did he know that?

Ah, yes, he'd leaped again....

His head began to feel numb now. He could feel it creep from the centre of his scalp and sliding downwards across his forehead and cheeks, then across his mouth. He tried to lick his lips with a dry tongue and grimaced. The numbness was working down his neck as he moved the bottles around with fingers that felt thick and unco-operative. Some fell to the black-tiled floor, spilling their contents about his bare feet.

"Must be a hypochondriac or a chemist...." he muttered thickly.

"Actually, he was a singer, Sam." Al's famillíar voice came from behind. "And don't waste any more time looking for more pills. He's taken enough."

"What do you mean? Did he overdose?" Already the words were beginning to slide together.

"Not exactly, Sam. It was all prescription drugs at prescribed doses....according to the autopsy report. Of course there were eight different doctors that prescribed them." The lights on Ziggy's communication box danced wildly, and Al's cigar fell from his fingers into oblivion as if he didn't even notice it in his agitation. He began waving his hands in a purely Italian expression of agitation. "You've got to get help, Sam. Right now."

"Okay," Sam agreed, holding a hand to his eyes as they seemed to lose their focus. He looked back up and slowly slid the mirrored door across the medicine chest. "What happened? Who am I?"

"It's August 16," Al began, conferring with Ziggy. "And you've got to get help, Sam, 'cause you're...."

He looked up, concern and urgency in his furrowed brow.

But he didn't need to say any more.

Sam was touching his face in the reflection, lines of life etched above the classic cheekbones in a face once-beautiful, but now, almost puffy with dissipation. His hand moved to brush the hair from his forehead in an attempt to see more clearly. Focus getting harder to maintain. A thin ribbon of paler coloured hair showed the beginnings of a tide mark in the blue black hair.

"I'm Elvis....again...oh boy." Sam's tone was strangled with emotion.

"That's why you have to move, Sam."

Sam looked from the fascinating reflection to Al's in the mirror. He obviously did not understand. Perhaps the drugs had blocked his thought processes. He felt he was wading through something thick and sticky.

"It's August 16, Sam." Abruptly the urgency chilled from Al's voice leaving a dead calm. "The day Elvis died."

Sam looked at him uncomprehendingly. After all, if he was dying, he wouldn't feel like this surely? He had danced with death before, closely. Where was the chill, the sweat beading his palms, his forehead and across his shoulders? Where was the self-knowledge that these were his final moments?

"No," he denied

Al looked at him, shaking his head, worried and frustrated. "Ginger," he pronounced suddenly, walking through the bathroom door. "Quick, wake her. Ginger, your girlfriend. She'll get help."

Sam staggered, trying to grasp the door handle.

Al's head abruptly poked through the door to snap at him. "Hurry, Sam, you haven't got much time according to Ziggy."

"I'm not a hologram," Sam tried to mutter, finally turning the handle.

"But you may be a ghost soon if you don't hurry, Sam."

"Okay, okay." Sam slurred, almost falling on top of the not-so-young redhead, naked and deeply asleep in the bed.

He tried to shake her with arm becoming heavy, ineffectually. She didn't appear to register his effort.

Sam leant over her, losing his balance and finding his ear against her breast. He listened, his eyes closed, exhausted with the effort to keep them open. Her heartbeat echoed what he felt was his own slowing heart.

"This is no time for any of that," Al's voice seemed to buzz about him like an insect that was getting under his skin...only his skin was now too thick for him to feel anything at all.

"She's alive," Sam breathed out, not moving at all.

"You've got to <u>try</u>, Sam. Use the phone."

Sam tried to lift himself from his warm cradle. He groaned and fell back on his soft cushioned warmth. Al winced in sympathy.

"Come on, Sam, dial 911. Get help."

Sam looked at him, almost uncomprehendingly. Then with some strength he did not know he still had, he rolled from the woman, and off the bed. Without attempting to stand, his hand reached out and searched for the phone, pulling it from the table. He looked at it, his head bowed, and heavy. His fingers tried to touch the dial, but there was no strength left in them and he was barely aware that he was tipping sideways, falling towards the bathroom floor.

Beside him, Al almost yelled his insistence, wanting to shake him, to lift him, to use the the phone himself, but he could do nothing but watch Sam's eyes close and his facial muscles loosen in what he could only assume was death.

"NO, Sam, no. You can't die, you can't die. Not now. It's not time...." Tears, slow tears that drew out the pain he was feeling like a knot inside that grew to the size and shape of his chest. He could not breath. He wanted to sob and scream, but instead, just stood and watched Sam's still body...

* * *

He did not know how long he had kept vigil beside Sam's body. Never once, whilst he did, did he question the fact that he was still there, somehow connected to Sam's brain waves, which by now should have been stilled forever. He ignored Ziggy's messages even when they became loud and insistent. It was not until the body that he loved as Elvis, and the essence, the soul of the man he had known as Sam, had been taken to the morgue and laid out on the stainless steel table awaiting autopsy, that he turned away and re-entered the present time.

In the blue room, the still figure that was Sam's body, but contained Elvis, lay on a stark white bed, covered with a hospital style blanket.

Ziggy's box was still clasped loosely in his hand and he didn't bother looking at it. He moved over to the body, Sam's body, the tears making slow trails down his cheeks, to drip onto the edges of the bed.

A soft hand touched his arm, and he turned to see Dr. Gooshie looking up at him with soft, sympathetic eyes. For a moment, he did not comprehend what she was saying, he was wrapped completely in his grief.

"He's not dead, Admiral."

His brow creased in a questioning frown, not believing.

"If he was dead, we would not be able to maintain contact with him, through you."

He stared at her unaware of how much emotion he was showing at that moment. "I saw him die. I've seen men die before and I saw Samuel Beckett die."

She shook her head. "You can still focus in on him. Try it."

Abruptly, Al did just that.

In the morgue of the Memphis Baptist Hospital, the naked body of Elvis lay on a trolley, the torso covered by a white sheet, still and pale. He could swear that it would be cold to touch, yet it wasn't quite waxen....was it?

He moved forward and looked carefully as trying to examine the pores of the skin itself. Then straightened, his eyes widened. It wasn't Sam, and it wasn't alive....this was an image, but that was all. Where was Sam?

He had to be nearby, otherwise there would be no way he could have homed in on Sam's presence.

His eyes searched the room, noting the other figures, toe-tagged lying still on their own trolleys. A groan issued from one of them, and Al moved quickly to its side, but it was a sad-faced woman of indefinite years, waxen and quite dead.

He could feel the unease prickle at his shoulder blades, like an unwelcome guest.

He wanted to scream to Ziggy to get him the hell out of there, but he couldn't. Sam was more important than any fear of spooks and things....he hoped.

Carefully he crept to the next one, and then to the next one, knowing that, inevitably, he'd have to look inside the stainless steel drawers that held....he didn't want to know what.

"I don't want to do this, Sam," he recited, meaning every word of it, even as he made himself move towards the silent drawers. "Not even for you, Sam. I don't want to do this. You know how I feel about this kind of thing. Why can't you just wake up now and, and we can get the heck out of here. Sam...." his voice was a low growl that tried to intimate a threat, but was in fact a plea. "Come on, Sam, where are you?

Abruptly he leant forward placing his head inside the first of the drawers.

"Oh heck, I can't see a thing. Sam, is that you? Sam?"

He pulled his head out again aware of the strange sensation of cold that passed through him that has no basis in reality. As a hologram, he felt nothing when travelling around in Sam's "real" world. Not even when a car passed through him....

"This is silly, Sam. I can't see in those things....actually, I'm glad that I can't see in one of those things. You never know who you're going to meet....or what...."

He sat down on some invisible seat and tried to read the information Ziggy was feeding him. So intense was his concentration, he was startled when two men entered the room.

"You'll have to sign here, sir, for the release of the deceased. John Brown," the one, dressed in a white lab coat stated non-emotionally.

The other, sombrely presented, seemed just the type to run a funeral parlour Al, decided grimly. Not that he knew very many funeral directors personally.

"Security?" the lab coat asked... a strange question.

The other nodded. Obviously a man of very few words.

Al closed his eyes with frustration, almost missing the fact that they went to one of the drawers, marked it with a red tag and left.

Al looked at it, frustrated at the fact that he could not see into it... open it and get Sam out... if Sam was in there.

"Oh, Sam, what are we going to do?"

He looked at Ziggy's box, watching the coloured lights dance before reading the results. "Ziggy says you're here to save Elvis, Sam.... save Elvis? What the hell do you mean save Elvis? You mean those rumours about him serving hamburgers in Kalamazoo are true? Or cooking pizzas in Marrickville, Australia? Or.... " He seemed to stagger backwards with the enormity of what he was thinking. "Elvis is alive? The king is alive?" He started to smile. Then abruptly stopped. "How did you get the information, Ziggy? We know Sam's not dead yet, but..." And as he spoke he realised that the mortuary had started to wave before his eyes. He looked down at his arm, holding it out before him. It seems to grow transparent as if he was made of some smokey material. "... no... Sam, don't die...." This came out as a hoarse whisper. "Sam...."

* * *

The womb was supposed to be warm and comfortable, and death was like climbing back into the womb, wasn't it? But this was cold.... so cold...

There was darkness... his eyes were shut, but no colour came through their lids... nothing... so dark.

Drifting, weightless... voices touched and caressed him. He was aware of his father somewhere nearby. The scent of perfume just drifted past.... his mother? Then, an almost overwhelming sense of her presence.

But his mother was still alive somewhere.... somewhere....

Yet he could feel the strength of her love calling him, insistently.

Swirls of grey in his mind, shrouded and clouded, scenes played in slow motion, faces calling him... he didn't recognise them.

And she was there. Calling him. He felt himself heading towards the lighting grey swirling that was turning golden, brilliantly golden.

A tunnel, he recognised. Dying is like falling into the brightness. No fear. No guilt. Peace.

It cocooned him gently and she was there, smiling, welcoming him. The dark shadows around her eyes had been smoothed away and her generous smile and bright eyes welcomed him, and called him.

"Elvis..."

"Sam!"

He felt himself poised on the edge of a journey. The comfort of the light - its promise and balm - soothed him, calmed him.

"Elvis..." she was whispering his name, yet it seemed as imperative as it was insistent.

"...no, Sam, don't die..."

His body recognised her, and he hesitated, yearning to go and be enfolded by her arms once more... but the other voice, he knew it and reacted.

He turned back to the cold darkness. "... but I'm so tired, Al. I've done my best... again and again.... and sometimes I live four or five lives without sleeping once.... I'm tired of trying to find out what God wants of me... what's expected... trying to do right...."

"Come on, son. Time to come home." Her voice was like a phrase of music. It rose and fell in a Southern melody, like a lullabye. He wanted to surrender himself to that warm embrace.

"Mom?" he asked hesitantly. He thought he recognised her... but was it his mother? Was it...?

He looked into her eyes and didn't see his own reflected there. He tried to focus on her smile... the small round face and dark hair and brilliant eyes... familiar, yet....

"Elvis..." she whispered, like a caress.

"Sam..." The wealth of pain called him. He recognised it tugging at him. He looked at the woman and shook his head, turning slowly....

From the corner of his eye he could see his father.... his father smiled and nodded.

Sam felt himself nod back and completed his turn. The blackness faced him, and tiredness washed over him once more. He could feel himself try to move, but each limb seemed to weigh more than he could ever lift, but he tried. He concentrated with all his strength, trying to find the strength to lift his lids, and roll his hand outwards from his body.... then his hand fell from his body.

* * *

The sound made Al turn. The drawer was marked with the red tag, and he grinned, then moved quickly, nervously, frustrated at his inability to reach his friend.

"Sam... Sam... are you awake?"

But there was no more sound.

"It's only the dead talking... " Al muttered, every old superstition of his race, coming from somewhere within his blood, chilling it. He shivered as if he could hearthe voices within his head.

"Sam?" he asked more hesitantly. "Are you there, Sam?"

He listened, still and expectantly. Were they knuckles he could hear moving against the sides of the metal drawers?

Al rushed to the door, sticking his head through the temporal fabric, and calling down the hall. He knew it wouldn't do him any good, but it felt better to be doing something.

"Hey, someone, he's alive in here. He's alive and you've got to get him out."

* * *

He could breath... he could feel his breaths become deeper as air started to fill his lungs. Not gentle inhalations, but deep gaspings as life painfully returned to his still hands and feet. The tips

of his fingers, touched the cold steel beneath him, gathering back to his palm in an effort to try and find warmth.

His teeth protested against the warmth that tried to return with the quickening pace of his heart. His extremities aching as the blood tried to warm them unwillingly. The pain was almost too much for him to bear, except.... he couldn't breath the stale cold air. It chilled his lungs.

"No, I can't die now... I came back.... I came back... isn't that... what You wanted?" he pleaded in his mind.

"Stop pannicking," he whispered. But his body tried to gasp despite his words.

He opened his eyes to the complete blackness, then shut them again. "Got to concentrate."

Al crossed to the draw, staring it as if trying to open it by sheer will-power alone.

"What's happening, Sam?" he asked. He looked down at his arm again.... he was starting to fade again. He looked at Ziggy's panel. "God, Sam, it's up to 97 percent chance. You can't die, Sam, you can't. It's not finished yet."

Closing his eyes, he put his head into the drawer, but it was black.... nothing but black and a body... struggling to breathe.

"Sam?" he asked, unsure.

Sam could hear Al in his mind. He tried to speak but his airways were dried and painful. He tried to move his tongue to his lips, but there was no moisture in his mouth.

"Ah..." he groaned softly, forcing sound from his throat. "Ahh..."

He was trying to call Al's name, but couldn't.

"Ah..." he tried again.

"That you, Sam?" Al asked again.

"Ahh..." Sam gasped, this time making a raw sound of air moving painful into his lungs.

"No air?" Al asked urgently. "There's no air? You've got to stop gasping, Sam. Try doing it slower. Think, Sam. Think. You're good at that. You'll use too much air if you grab at the air like that. You gotta calm down, Sam. Do.... meditation or something. They're coming to get you, Sam. Just keep alive."

Sam heard him, and recognised the truth. He had to try and survive. With the strength of will-power that had originally woken him from his drug-induced coma, he began a relaxation technique. Fear chilled him more than the cold metal about him, making him shiver. He deliberately took slower, shallower breath, even though their raggedness through shivering lips It all seemed like a surrealistic exercise in existence.

"Sam, you can't die now." Al pulled his head from the drawer, and fretfully moved between it and the doorway, barely realising that his form was fading and solidifying almost with each breath that Sam dragged into his lungs. "Where are those guys? John Brown indeed? You've gotta come now. You gotta save him.... save Sam... save Elvis." All the while, his fingers danced their communication with Ziggy and he read a stream of information that had him widen his eyes.

"Wittness protection scheme? But Ziggy, that's for someone involved in a criminal case and when did....? How the hell did you get into the F.B.I. computers....? No, I don't really want to know. Tina, I'm gonna kiss you if Sam survives." Then, more honestly, "Probably gonna kiss you anyway..." He stuck his head through the door one more time to see a stainless steel trolley and two white coated men with the business suited one coming down the corridor.

"Hurry up," he yelled. He knew it didn't do any good, but he had to at least do something. "He's in here.... hurry."

Sam was still struggling with his self-control, but it was becoming easier. This body had fought desperately for life and for a moment, he seemed to have an insight, or was it access to the memories of the man whose body he wore? He suddenly calmed and it became easier. A kaleidoscope of partial memories intermingled and he couldn't separate them --- faces smiled and seemed to encourage him, but for what he couldn't decide. They smiled and frowned and cried. They called his name... so many names... Frank, Dylan, Max, Eddy and Chance, Samantha and Jimmy...

He knew he was barely conscious now... He wasn't sure if it was because he had slowed his breathing or whether what little air surrounded him had been just about used up. He was still alive. Just...

"Come on, come on," Al encouraged, his eyes expressive with the urgency he was feeling. He herded them into the room, and pointed to the drawer after popping his head through the wall to listen for Sam's quietened breathing. He could just hear him... just.... he hoped.

Unaware of any urgency, the men strolled in, quietly talking.

"What's the time then?" one asked.

"No rush yet," the other answered smiling. "Someone's coming over to dress him shortly."

"Come on, come on," Al nearly bounced in his urgency, making large hand motions.

"Yeah, well, I just get this feeling..." the first man was hesitant, then turned towards the drawer.

"That's it. Come on," Al encouraged.

He slowly drew the drawer open.

The warmer, fresh air caressed Sam's face, releasing his eyes so that they snapped suddenly open.

"Ah..." his dry lips sighed, not moving. "Hiii..."

The man looked at him, alarmed. "Hi yourself." And he turned away quickly as if not really wanting to see. "He's awake," he said to the others.

The suited man crossed to the drawer, frowning. He examined him without touching, as if he found it all distasteful... if you could read any reaction from him at all. "High drug tolerance. Should have given him more."

"More!" exclaimed Al. "Are you insane?! More? What were you trring to do.... kill the man?" He looked at the man's face as he slipped some pills from a container in his pocket, then crossed to fill a beaker with water. Al stared at him harshly. If he'd been there in person, the man would

have known him and been impressed, but as it was he ignored Al and crossed back to Sam to place the pills between his lips, then raising his head, force the liquid into his mouth.

Sam's eyes widened in alarm, but he was helpless to protest. He was so weak and tired; his mouth and lips, dry and painful.

He choked on the pills, but swallowed at least one of them.

Slowly the blackness started to come back to him. Oh no, he groaned.

Al watched in horrified silence as they lifted him onto the trolley they had brought in with them, and draped a sheet over his hips and legs.

"Nice to have friends in high places when you want to disappear," one remarked quietly, just for the hearing of the other one.

His companion looked at him somberly. "I don't know. I'd be like being born again... look at him... naked and vulnerable."

"Stressed and sick," gritted Al, aware that now Sam had gone. A blue light that seemed to envelope him, showed that he had again leaped and Al was really looking at Elvis. Would he have wanted to come back? He'd have died, suffocated in a drawer in the morgue, if Sam hadn't have leapt. So, where was he now? How did he start again?

Obviously uncomfortable with that thought, the other man completely covered the now-still body. "Yeah, well, let's get John Brown out of here. The hurst for the Presley body should be drawing up about now and they'll be coming to get him." He looked towards the shrouded figure waiting its trolley. "...and all hell will break loose when it does."

They started to push the covered body down the corridor towards a back entrance.

Al could feel the tenuous link that held him to Sam fade... and at once he was in the waiting room... waiting to find where in time, who in time, Sam had gone to again. For whatever reasons, Elvis had chosen an anonymous life... and Ziggy wasn't saying where. He could, he guessed, find him with his connections in the military.... did the military ever outrank the F.B.I.? He doubted it. The man obviously wanted peace... who was he to disturb it. Yet curiosity nibbled at him like an insect in the twilight. He wanted to know why it was so important for Elvis to live.... for John Brown to live, he corrected himself.

"Is he still alive, Ziggy?" he asked quietly.

The computer deliberately misinterpreted him. "Scanning for Dr Beckett's brain waves to establish contact. There seems to be some interference at present."

"That's not what I meant, Ziggy," Al snapped. "And you know it."

Ziggy's voice sounded remarkably supercilious. "If you meant someone else, you should have asked for them, Admiral."

"Sometimes, Ziggy, you're too big for your circuit."

"Sounds uncomfortable, Admiral."

Al Calavicci stared at the computer's console and started to use some colourful Italian phrases.

"Talking and cursing to yourself, Al?" a softly feminine voice asked from behind him.

Tina, blonde, beautiful and squeezed into a sexy white overall, crossed to the console as well.

Abruptly Al turned and grabbed her arms to kiss her.

"What was that for?" she asked in her husky voice, bewildered. "Not that I'm complaining."

"Promised God," Al said with a straight face and laughing eyes. "Honest to God I did."

"Sure," Tina smiled and firmly disengaged his hands. "Now what are you going on about?"

"It's Elvis. He's alive somewhere... " Al announced as if sharing a revelation.

"I know," Tina agreed matter-of-factedly. "I saw him last night when Dr Gooshie and I had dinner, didn't I, Gooshie?"

She turned to Gooshie who had crawled out from underneath the console. His round face broke into a rare smile and he nodded.

"Burger King I think it was," she smiled at Al kindly. Then held out her hand to Gooshie. "He was singing as he cooked burgers... couldn't mistake him."

And she moved, smoothly graceful, swayingly out of the room, Dr Gooshie in tow.

That wasn't what Al had wanted to hear, but he let her get away with it just this once. He smiled at the picture she made and the one she had described. Elvis, alive, and cooking hamburgers for a living. Singing for his own pleasure.

Suddenly he was hungry himself, and he thought about following the two if they were really going to Burger King, he grinned. "The king is dead, long live.... John Brown..."

THE LEAP INTO PRINT

Reviews by Susan Clarke

Oh boy!

Well, that was my reaction when I found my first Quantum Leap book. It was at a Victorian convention and I saw them tucked under someone's arm. I accosted them (the carrier, that is) and used every piece of persuasion I could think of so that they would show me the source of these books... only to find it was at the huckster's table straight across from the one Joanne and I were manning that weekend.

The books I have collected so far come in three categories: the novelisations of episodes; the "concordance" of the series; and original novels.

Julie Robitaille's novelisations Quantum Leap: The Beginning and The Ghost & The Gumshoe are a great record of the episodes. The first, The Beginning, starts as the episode did, and lets the plot unfold with as much confusion as the episode did: the first startling appearance of Al suddenly popping in; Sam's questioning his sanity, trying to find the elusive whisps of recollection in his "cheesehole" memory; trying to fly... It was a delight. However, it was a faithful retelling in easily-read style, without adding to the characters. In Robitaille's books, there is nothing of the author's interpretation of the *feelings* , *background*, *colour* of the characters that she is writing about. This doesn't mean I didn't enjoy the books, but they lacked something. This was even more evident in The Ghost & The Gumshoe. The episodes of QUANTUM LEAP themselves show a rich tapestry life and is one of the most delightful and exciting things about the series... nothing, no-one is considered ordinary... each has its special spark. The Ghost & The Gumshoe tell two stories --- A Portrait for Troian which, during the series, was told as a Gothic, complete with thrills and chills. The Ghost section of the book seems to have truncated that moody episode and makes it seem almost matter-of-fact. The Gumshoe reads much better as the author captures the charm of the era of colourful phrase and excitement.... there's something of the magic of Play It Again Seymour in it, however, once again, the author, in her zeal to be faithful to the script, has lost some of the magic, the texture of the show.

Ashley McConnell, on the other hand, has offered two original novels in Quantum Leap: The Novel and Too Close For Comfort which are both interesting and well-fleshed out, character-wise. The Novel is one that could have easily been made into an episode and was told in such a way you could see the characters, their moods, their problems and Sam's character comes out very strongly in this one. Basically, Sam leaps into an accident victim with precognition, working in a broken-down carnival. As a last-ditch effort to survive, the carnival's owner, Miss Aline Schaeber, puts everything into the building of a new attraction. There's lots of tension between all the protagonists - based on jealousy, manipulation, deceit and love - all the elements of a good novel. Sam has to decide on whether to sacrifice his "host" or his boss... and Sam, being Sam, it isn't a choice at all.

Too Close for Comfort is even better, as a novel, for me. It gave some interesting insights into Al and the choices he has had to make in life, as well as Sam's frustrations in being tied to a

"character" at times. It also gives some insight into the background setting - about Ziggy and Tina and Gooshie and the Project. It's suspenseful, frustrating, and one of those books that you can't put down until you are finished. Well worth a read. In it, Al finds himself pushing to keep involved with Sam's character who has to "go it alone" throughout most of the book. He's too close to Sam and it was a crucial time of his own life. Sam's frustrated, and almost tossed on the waves from a stormy father-daughter relationship - not being able to help... yet wanting to, desperately.

Louis Chunovic's book The Quantum Leap Book is a coffee-table format book with lots of photos - colour and black & white. It comes with episode synopses in date order - the dates of the episodes rather than when they were aired - and comes with official biographies of Sam Beckett and Al Calavicci. It also comes with interviews with Scott Bakula, Dean Stockwell and the show's creator, Donald Bellasario. To give it further interest, it covers costume and production design and comes with the official biographies of the stars of the show. It's really a worthwhile book for those who are into the show and are writing for it. I must admit that I found it hard to write for the series because the characters are well-rounded and there are few loop-holes in them to fill in. However, the situations and people that Sam could leap into was irresistible, and this book was great for looking up details of past "lives" and situations.

Since the series has ended, these books have been a life-line to me, as the Trek books were during the drought before the Trek movies. I realise that there are probably more novels out by now... or novelisations... but I haven't managed to get them yet. I would really like to hear from someone about their details please.

The Books:

Chunovic, Louis (1993) The Quantum Leap Book Citadel Press: New York. 160pp.

McConnell, Ashley (1992) Quantum Leap: The Novel Ace: New York. 294pp.

McConnell, Ashley (1993) Too Close For Comfort Ace: New York. 265pp.

Robitaille, Julie (1990) Quantum Leap: The Beginning Corgi: England. 192pp.

Robitaille, Julie (1990) The Ghost & The Gumshoe Corgi: England. 192pp.

MATILDA

By Sue Bursztynski and Susan Clarke

Note: *For those unfamiliar with Robin of Sherwood, this is a sequel to the final episode, "Time Of The Wolf", in which Marion, who lost her first husband in Season 2 and has dithered about accepting his successor, jilted him on their wedding day and went into a convent. What with wolf warriors, golems and evil sorcerors(all present in that episode) her nerves simply wouldn't take it any more!*

Lady Matilda Fitzwalter was practising her archery when word came, via her father, that her betrothed had run off into the forest and become an outlaw, after a tremendous quarrel with his own father, the Earl of Huntingdon.

She didn't know whether to be relieved or insulted - the latter especially as it was over some woman - but felt a little of both as she smashed the arrow into the dead centre of the target and pretended it was Robert's splendid chest.

She knew she didn't really have the right to be hurt - it was, after all, an arranged marriage, the betrothal ceremony having taken place when he was a toddler and she a babe in arms, more-or-less, and they had only met about a dozen times since.

The trouble was, it was the last straw. They should have wed when she first became ripe for marriage, but he was off in the Holy Land as one of King Richard's pages. That was not really his fault, she was just enough to admit; it was, ultimately, his father's, for having rebelled against Richard's father, together with his royal brother of Scotland. Richard held no particular grudge for that - he'd actually released them from their forced vows of fealty in return for money to help pursue his crusade - but he was practical enough to know he didn't want to take any chance on things happening while he was away, and so young Robert had gone as a hostage, under the guise of honoured page. He should have come back when Richard was kidnapped in Austria and, indeed, had set off for home with his uncle Edgar, but the pair of them had vanished for some time. Edgar had returned alone, eventually, claiming he'd lost his young charge somewhere in France; later, Robert had returned home on his own, after having been seen in the seamier parts of London. The Earl had been furious and they had begun having those quarrels that had become such a regular part of their lives.

And meanwhile, she had waited...and waited...

If she'd had any sense, she thought, she would have run off with some handsome minstrel. But she believed firmly that betrothal was as good as marriage, even if she'd had no say in the matter; in the eyes of heaven, they were wed.

Did he really think he and this red-haired outlaw-woman could marry lawfully?

He was hers! By heaven and by law, he belonged to her, Matilda. Well, there wasn't much she could do about it by law, as he had placed himself outside that, but he was bound by his vows to heaven and he would fulfil them. If she could catch up with him.

Ruefully, she admitted to herself that this wasn't likely in the near future. For one thing, she was unlikely to find him in the wide expanse of Sherwood. For another, what would happen if she did find him? Would he laugh? No, Robert was far too much of a gentleman for that. More likely, his fair skin would flush with embarrassment. He would cringe as she made a scene before this Marion. Then he'd point out that as he couldn't come home, any wife of his would have to share his forest life. Quite probably, in the end, he would honour his vows - but not willingly.

And so she continued her maiden life, with the support of her confessor, who helped her to hold off her father's arguments that the betrothal was surely null and void and that she should accept one of her many suitors. The confessor no doubt hoped she would eventually go into a convent and her father almost sent her off to one, but she managed to keep both men on edge till she had thought it out ... and secretly trained with sword and staff, continuing to practise her archery and hunting.

And then rumours came that the outlaw woman had gone into a convent herself, jilting her lover.

It was time.

* * *

"I'm fed up," said Will. "We've been on this road for two days now. They're not coming."

"Could they have changed routes in the last minute?" Tuck wondered.

"Our sources would have let us know," Robin insisted. "That tax cart is coming, I'm telling you. It's just delayed for some reason."

"I could nip into Wickham," Much offered. "They could send someone to find out."

"We'd be one less, then, if it did come - and you'd be cut off," Robin said doubtfully. But it was true, they had been waiting overlong and perhaps Much's idea was the only solution.

"All right," he said finally. "But don't be more than an hour, mind - they can send one of the children to let us know."

Much scrambled down the tree and ran off into the forest.

The Blue Boar Inn was an oasis of conviviality along the road to the village.

A slim, fair lad stood in the doorway, looking in. Half a pig was roasting slowly over a fire, wafting delicious smells that made him salivate.

It was the smell that distracted the young man hurrying down the road. He stopped, sniffed the air. For a moment he stood, hesitant, as if deciding whether to go forward or into the inn.

"Much!" someone called.

"Can't stop," Much called back, though doing just that.

"Oh, yes, we forgot," the other man answered and there was a chorus of laughter.

"Yer lazy sods," a voice, commanding and female, berated them. "You 'ave loose lips aplenty." This seemed to be a pointed reminder of the young stranger standing in the doorway.

"Then give us ale, Mistress Joan, and keep our lips a-busy with its nectar," one patron laughed.

"I'll give you the back of me hand if I 'ear any more of yer smart mouth, John Candlewick."

"My humble apologies, Mistress." The offender was obviously undaunted by her form or her anger.

The place looked welcoming and, in truth, the stranger was hungry and thirsty, but on a mission to find someone. The forest was deep and unwelcoming about him. Perhaps a few minutes for food wouldn't hurt...

He stepped back, bumping into Much, who was now bent over a water barrel by the side of the inn.

"Watch it!" Much snapped.

"Sorry."

He looked like a puppy who wasn't sure whether to growl or back away. Making up his mind, he straightened up.

"My name is Matthew of Doncaster." He was just a beardless stripling, Much saw.

"I'm Much, the miller's son," Much offered, determined to be friendly. "Sorry, I just had a bit of a shock and I'm in a hurry. Why don't you go into the inn? Mistress Joan won't bite, even if she sounds like it."

"I'm not hungry, really," the other youth lied. "I only wanted some information about the area."

"Well, I'm on my way to Wickham; I can show you the way to wherever you're going, but you'll 'ave to 'urry along of me."

"All right, then."

"Takin' away me customer, are yer?" Joan called as they turned away.

"We'll be back for a drink later," Much called back.

They loped along together. Much noticed the other boy was slender and not very tall. He couldn't have been more than fifteen or sixteen and small for his age at that; there was not the slightest shadow of beard on his face, though of course, fair as he was, it might not show for a while after it started growing in anyway. A riot of fair curls cascaded over his forehead and down to the nape of his neck.

"Now, where were you goin'?"

"Um, Wickham will do, I suppose. I heard that they -" He hesitated.

"Yes?"

"Well, I heard that, maybe, sometimes, some of Robin Hood's men go there."

Much pulled up sharply, so suddenly that the boy barged into him.

"Why're you lookin' for them?" he demanded.

Forest-green eyes looked at him penetratingly. "You. You're one of them, aren't you?"

"Am not! I just wondered, 's all. I got friends in Wickham. I don't like them accused of har-bour-or-in' outlaws."

Matthew laughed. "It's no secret. I asked. Sheriff picks up the villagers every now and then, throws them all in prison and then lets them out again, all over harbouring outlaws."

"Well, anyway, they won't just tell anyone who comes and asks. What do you want to know for?"

"I want to join them."

Much scratched his head. "Why'd you want to do that? It's dangerous. And cold in winter. An' you go 'ungry when there's no game."

"Going hungry or cold's nothing new to most of us."

Much looked at the boy with sudden shrewdness. Slow he might be, but, as he often insisted, not truly a halfwit.

"Not one of us, though, are you? Don't know what you are, but you talk like a noble."

"My parents were servants in a noble household. Look, I know you're one of the band. I remember your name. You should lie about it if you don't want to be found out. If you won't take me to Robin, though, I'll find my own way. Goodbye." He started to move off.

"Wait! I'm only tryin' to spare yer. You done something to get you into trouble?"

"Not yet. Do you want me to?"

"No! I mean why d'yer want to join if you don't 'ave to?"

"If I had to, there are plenty of other outlaw bands in Sherwood. This one fights for the things I believe in. Will you take me along, then?"

Much thought about it. It wasn't as if he was leading the lad to their actual camp or anything. Robin might not be pleased to have an ambush interrupted, but the truth was, they could use an extra bow since Marion was gone. They'd been "auditioning" local lads and some joined them part-time, when their villages were involved; Robin said this gave the villagers more self-respect than merely having half-a-dozen rebels do all their fighting for them. But none, so far, had been good enough to stay permanently with them.

"I got business in Wickham," he said. "Wait 'ere for me."

Matthew nodded and sat on a fallen log as Much continued on his way.

When he returned, he was hurrying, almost running.

"C'mon," he signalled as he came abreast of Matthew, "we'll be late."

"Be late for what?" Matthew asked as he rose and jogged lightly beside Much.

"The action," Much said briefly. He looked at the bow and full quiver across Matthew's back. "Are you good?"

"Good at what?"

"In a fight, o' course."

"I don't know," Matthew replied honestly, then wondered if he should have bluffed. "But I can shoot an arrow and use a staff - does that count?"

Much, who was beginning to think he might have made a big mistake, smiled. "Yep. 'Cause I think we're about to find a fight."

* * *

The moment he let Much go, Robin knew he shouldn't have. The tax cart would come and he'd be short. He paced back and forth until Will's signal alerted him to the wagon and mounted escort coming down the rutted track from Nottingham. The sounds of broken twigs and crunching leaves under many hooves indicated a guard probably larger than expected. Robin signalled his men to cover and lithely climbed the tree he had selected to lead them from.

The guards were surprised even though they'd expected an attack at some stage. They'd drawn the short straws at the castle for tax-cart duty, said goodbye to their loved ones and hoped that death would be swift and clean - and, if they survived the expected attack, that they got to report to King John rather than the Sheriff of Nottingham; the walls of Nottingham castle were festooned with the bodies of those who'd displeased him, especially on Tuesdays, when hangings and floggings were done.

Their defence of the cart was in complete earnest; they had to put up their best efforts with the knights in De Rainault's service grimly determined to add Robin Hood to their personal trophy counts. Damn those knights, they'd actually been hoping for an attack - and now they were getting their wish!

Arrows sang through the air, reducing the numbers before the outlaws ventured to drop from the trees to finish it with their swords. Horses reared, screaming, and did some more of their work for them. To the knights, it was unsporting, but it made complete sense to reduce the numbers of your heavily armed foes when all you had were half a dozen veterans and a few village lads carrying their ancestors' weapons from Hastings.

John flung himself into the fight, bellowing, Will snarled at a Brabancon who reminded him of his wife's killers, Tuck's sword whirled. Nasir, with his twin blades, cut a deadly swath, the protective shells of the nearest knights about as much use as if they were naked.

Robin had drawn his sword as well, fighting two guards at once. Sweat was beading his brow and trickling into the corner of his eyes; his vision blurred painfully.

Just then, he heard the close passage of an arrow in flight and one of his attackers fell forward, clutching at the length of arrow not buried in his body.

Robin heard the crunch of feet arriving and became aware of Much's presence beside him.

"Where in heaven's name have you been?" he growled as he swung at his surviving attacker.

Much struck another down. "In Wickham. They said," thump, "the cart was," crash, "on its way. Oh, this is," smash, "Matthew o' Doncaster. 'E wants to join us."

"How d'you do," grunted Robin, glancing over as he parried an attack by a guard; Matthew was fighting his own battle with a staff, as he had no sword, holding his own, somehow, till Nasir came to the rescue.

The outlaw leader's jaw dropped; the soldier's sword whistled over his head, to be smashed aside by Much.

"Robin! What're yer doin'?" bellowed the young man.

Robin concentrated again. With the extra help, the battle was soon over.

The surviving soldiers were disarmed, stripped to their shirts and leggings and sent on their way, tied to their horses, which were of no use to the outlaws. The band members and the boys helping gathered about the cart.

"Well-done, lad!" John chortled, thumping the boy on the back; he staggered.

His fair-skinned face was even paler than its normal colour. He'd acquitted himself well enough, but it was clear he'd never been in a serious fight before. He might be sick in a minute.

"Can he join us, Robin? Can he? Eh?" Much urged.

"No," Robin said flatly.

The others, who'd been congratulating Matthew, fell suddenly silent and stared at their leader in surprise.

"Robin! Why not?" John protested. "He gave us a hand and well he did, too, for a boy so young. He's earned his place."

"You can stay the night with us, that's all." Robin ignored John to address Matthew directly. "Tomorrow we take the money to Croxden Abbey for redistribution to those the Sheriff stole it from. We'll see that you get home safely."

"I have no more home," Matthew said, eyes meeting his.

"I find that hard to believe."

"What's'a matter, Robin?" Will demanded. "You've given a chance to lads who did less. Don't like 'is face or what?"

"I said, he's not joining us!" Robin snapped. The others stared at each other. It was so rarely he insisted on his own way without explanation, it had taken them totally by surprise. "Playing the Earl's son," John called it when it happened and, of course, Robin always got very apologetic after that, but they all suspected, somehow, that he was not going to apologise this time and that John had better not say it if he knew what was good for him.

"May I speak with you? In private?" the boy asked quietly.

Robin nodded curtly and they walked off into the trees by the road while the others worked at the cart. They came to a clearing by a pool and Robin whirled around, eyes blazing.

"Well, Matilda?"

She pulled her hood off with a sigh.

"I suppose I should have known you'd recognise me, though it's been years and I was disguised."

"Disguised! Did you really think you'd fool me with a haircut and male clothing? I do know your face; you've been listening to too many ballads, I'm afraid."

"Well, I fooled the others," she said calmly.

"They don't know you. It won't last, anyway. I don't care what the troubadours sing, there is no way a woman can pose as a young boy for any length of time... For God's sake, Matilda, go back! You don't have to do this; I do."

"Yes," she snapped. "You have to do it because of a woman - one who's left you!" As soon as she'd said it, she was sorry, seeing the naked grief on his face. "Look, I'm sorry. But the fact is, our betrothal still stands, as far as I'm concerned. I had two choices - a convent or join you and I know which I prefer. I've spent the last two years perfecting my archery skills and learning the use of sword and staff. I can hunt, heal and fight, if necessary. We can just tell the others I'm a woman, since we're to wed. Why didn't you, anyway?"

"I didn't want to embarrass you. And, no, you still can't join us. You aren't an outlaw and I won't let you become one."

"I'll go and kill a king's deer, then," she said sweetly.

"Don't you dare!"

"Watch me." She strolled away.

He caught up with her. Pounced.

"I said, no! Look. I told you, you can stay till tomorrow. We'll - we'll think of something. There has to be a way around this."

"Sorry. It's too late for me to go home. You're my husband, Robert, or as good as. You owe me." She turned and went back towards the others, knowing he'd feel guilty enough to delay while he agonised a little.

The others were waiting, Robin realised as he followed his erstwhile fiancée back to the road. They held their tongues, but Robin could see the question in their eyes. Much, however, was not as sensitive as the others.

"Well, Matthew, d'ye stay?" he asked.

"No!"

"Yes!" Matilda/Matthew and Robin answered at once.

Much looked, bewildered, from one to the other.

"Matthew," Robin said firmly, "will be returning to Doncaster as soon as we can escort him."

"Matthew." Matilda contradicted sweetly, "intends to eat venison tonight."

"And share it with the Sheriff, no doubt," Will scoffed, yet there was an uneasy look in his eye as he saw the "boy's" defiance.

"Aye," Matilda agreed, "if that's what it takes."

"You're not too old for a thrashing, if that's what it takes," Robin threatened, feeling frustrated by this boy/woman. He stepped forward, fists clenched by his side.

Suddenly, he found himself facing John and Nasir, the latter's eyes brimming with humour. He found himself wondering if Nasir knew, not daring to ask.

"The lad's proven himself, Robin. He's been blooded - and sighted by the Sheriff's men, hasn't he?" John pointed out reasonably.

"So have the village lads."

"That's different. They've all got cousins and brothers at Nottingham castle and the soldiers turn a blind eye an' you know it. Otherwise, we'd 'ave to kill them all. Matthew's another matter."

"No," Robin insisted adamantly. "They won't remember a mere suckling babe who stumbled on to a band of bandits at work. Matthew will go back to Doncaster."

"You were a mere suckling babe once - you went to the Crusades," Tuck pointed out from the other side.

Robin took another step forward. Matilda faced him from behind the shoulders of the others. She was pale but challenging. He felt a surge of admiration as well as bitter frustration.

"Matthew returns," he said quietly but firmly. "There will be no further debate." he turned away before he came to blows with his entire band; he'd done it once before, to win their respect, but would lose it if he went any further this time.

"How can I prove my worth?" Matilda called after him, as much a challenge as a question.

"Go home, grow up." Robin addressed the leaves of the forest rather than speak to her directly again.

"Give him a chance to prove himself, Robin," Nasir requested quietly, the subtle emphasis on that one word chilling Robin, who stopped.

Slowly, he turned back to the others, who had parted to reveal Matilda, slim and looking ridiculously young, poised and balancing a short staff between her white hands. How could they hold a weapon when they had been trained from birth to spin a fine thread and embroider neatly?

"No," he said again. "I will not fight you. I do not fight - children."

The others looked disapproving.

"We have work to do. The taxes have to be delivered to Croxden Abbey. The poor are more important than your vanity, Matthew."

Slowly, they all turned away, leaving only Robin and Matilda in open challenge on the road. Robin came closer, to speak to her.

"Is this why you came, Matilda? Revenge for past neglects?"

Matilda's eyes screamed here hidden distress. She turned swiftly to assist the others.

From the shadows, Nasir watched.

At the camp that night, she took part in the simple nightly ritual with the shared bowl of mead, watching as her Christian-born knight raised it in a rite older than their faith, murmuring "Herne protect us," and wondered what else she didn't know about him. She sipped, though, along with the others.

"What's this about?" she asked, after.

"Just a little ritual of Herne, Matthew," John explained kindly. "Been good to us, he has."

"Herne?"

"The Lord of the Trees," Tuck told her. "A remnant of paganism. And before you ask, I assure you the locals have no trouble being Christians and honouring the old gods as well. I'm a monk - I know how much of the old faith has been worked into ours! For that matter, even Nasir here takes part and he's a Muslim."

"Hmm...don't you have trouble reconciling this with 'There is no God but Allah' and that sip of mead with the prohibition on alcohol?"

The Arab only smiled, but the others stared at these words from the supposed fifteen-year-old.

"My uncle went off to the Crusades with his lord," she said hastily. "He told us all about the Saracens and their beliefs." Still they stared.

"Well, I'm famished," said Tuck suddenly. "There hasn't been time to prepare supper, either, so I'm afraid you lot will have to wait, unless you want to give a hand. Still, the sooner we begin...I don't suppose," he added wistfully to Matilda, "that you can cook, can you?"

As a matter of fact, she was an excellent cook; she'd taken over supervising the household when her mother died and had looked after her younger siblings, because the only nursemaids available were not very efficient. She'd been chatelaine to hundreds. But if she was going to stay - as she fully intended - she had better start the way she intended to go and she had no intention of being lumbered with the cooking and cleaning while the men did the fighting and hunting.

"Oh, I can just about roast a haunch of meat without burning myself," she said casually, "as long as someone else sets up the spit. That's about all, though. It was a large house with many servants and my job was in the stables." She was good with horses, so that was safe. She ignored Robin's glare; he knew perfectly well what she was capable of.

"Oh, well," Tuck sighed.

"It doesn't matter," Robin said firmly, "since he's not staying."

"Of course," Matilda added, as if he had not spoken, "you could always teach me, Brother Tuck. Then I could give you a hand."

By the brightening of his face, she could see she had won one of them. After all, she needn't ever become a good cook. Now to win the others...only, why was that Saracen smiling at her in that amused manner? As if he knew...

Robin's "no" was more to himself than anyone else. He had never felt so ineffective in his life. Her open defiance had them all cheering for the underdog - he could feel their questioning glances, their disapproval and puzzlement.

He should tell them who she was and serve her right!

Resentfully, he took a skin of wine and moved to the edge of the group who now seemed intent on showing Matilda the art of setting up a roasting spit. Supper was going to be a long time coming at this rate.

He rather envied the men of Wickham at this moment - at least their hearths were warm and welcoming and they were masters in their own families.

He took a long draught from the skin, savouring its warmth within him, with a half-formed desire to yield to its alcoholic haze. He didn't get drunk easily and, since his return from London, hadn't ever tried.

Tonight, he was going to try.

What a wife that one would make, he thought, taking another draught. Pampered daughter of a lord, what would she know of hardship? (Pampered? something in him jeered. And she looking after a household the size of several inns? Pampered?)

He tried not to notice how the newly-lit blaze of the fire called forth gold lights in her hair.

How he missed Marion right now!

He drank again. A long drink.

"You miss her," Nasir commented from by his elbow.

Robin glared at him, refusing to enter into any discussion about his feelings at that time. In fact, he was annoyed with Marion. How dare she leave him in this predicament! The woman he loved beyond his reach and the woman he was tied to not leaving it!

"Blast all women," he cursed, taking another swig. He wiped his hand roughly across his mouth and offered the skin to Nasir.

Nasir shook his head, still smiling. A sip of alcohol in Herne's ceremony was one thing, but taking it for the pleasure of sinking himself into its depths was another. Even if the Prophet had not forbidden wine, he could think of more delightful distractions to sink himself into. His eyes focussed on their would-be recruit.

"A handsome young man," he remarked.

Robin made an unintelligible sound as he continued to methodically empty the skin. Dammit, why wasn't he getting drunk? He felt a little giddy, but that was all.

Across the clearing, Much was showing Matilda how to pour a steady stream of ale into her mouth without spilling it - much.

"In fact," Nasir continued, "if he were a female, she would be quite beautiful, a delight to spin out the long, cold nights."

His voice was a wooing that had Robin turning and looking aghast at his companion.

"Such a woman would be the jewel of my harem - such fire, such excitement."

But before Robin could make a comment, he had moved off again, leaving Robin to stare at the dark shadows, then turn to see the young village lads still clustered about Matilda. He wondered if their bodies were telling them what their eyes didn't - why else make such a fuss over a fellow boy?

"What are you about?" he yelled at them.

The young men turned, looking guilty. Tuck confiscated the skin that they had been using and admonished them about the need for sobriety, the hypocrisy of which had the others of the band rolling about with laughter.

"C'mon, don't be too hard on 'em, Robin," Will admonished him gently. "See, they found out young Matthew couldn't wield a skin and were teaching him how."

"And getting him drunk in the process," Robin snapped.

"And that's so bad?" Will asked pointedly, looking at his half-empty wineskin.

"I'd like to return him to his father intact," Robin growled, marching over to where Matilda was now bending over the meat.

A strange word to use, Will thought, then shrugged. Robin was forever in a strange mood since Marion had left. Needed a woman, that one. True, it was Will's solution to most problems, but definitely appropriate in this case.

Now, there was a nice, kindhearted girl he knew in one of the local townships...where was it, Nottbury? Maybe if he smuggled her into the camp...

"I want a word with you," Robin hissed. Resignedly, she followed him.

He took her down by the stream, where they were alone, and whirled on her, moonlight bright enough to show the fury on his face.

"Look, there's no point in your trying on this popularity business," he snapped. "What does it matter how many of them want you to stay if I don't? You didn't come here to be a

member of the band, but to be my wife - and I don't want you. Even if I did, I couldn't allow you to share in this life."

"I thought that was the whole point of marriage?" she said calmly. "To share your partner's life, whatever it is?"

"Do you know what the word 'outlaw' means, Matilda?" he asked, exasperated. "It means you are without any legal protection whatsoever. Without any rights. Anyone can kill you with impunity. Anyone. We do what we have to, because the people need us, but you - you haven't yet done anything that will condemn you to this life. Go back while you can. Your father's probably looking for you already, anyway - if he finds his way here, do you think he'll care about the fact that I'm supposed to be his son-in-law? It'll be far more convenient for me to be dead. As for you, he'll marry you off to whatever fifty-year-old knight will have you after this escapade!"

"Don't you dare call this an escapade!" she snapped. "I'm aware of my vows, if you aren't!"

He threw up his hands in despair. "What vows? Our marriage was arranged for us when we were too young to know what was happening! Very well, then, if you're so sure about this, why don't we ask Tuck? There's surely a way around it and he'd know, or could find out."

"It doesn't matter what he says. I know what I've been brought up to believe."

"Believe, believe!" he shouted. "Now you know why I don't want you. The word 'love' doesn't come into it anywhere, does it? And how could it? I love Marion, it's that simple."

"And Marion's gone. She can't have l- "

"Don't say it. Don't. Or, so help me, I'll hit you! I will!"

"Good. Quarterstaff, then." There was a glint in her eye. "Not that you'd have much chance; you're a little the worse for wine. Actually," she added thoughtfully, "I'm rather flattered by that."

He snarled and stomped off to fetch the staffs. If he'd been totally sober, he would never have dreamed of hitting a woman, let alone fighting one.

But he wasn't sober. And he didn't like to think of the implications of that last remark. Nor did he care that he might be seen plucking two quarterstaffs from the ones leaning against an oak in readiness.

Nasir watched, his eyebrows climbing, considered interfering, then reconsidered. Maybe he would watch for the amusement value. Maybe afterwards he could offer to rub liniment and apply poultices to the combatants. He smiled. Well, one of the combatants at least. The other - he glanced over at the skin Tuck had put aside when he'd finished cooking their supper - could get comfort his own way.

* * *

Matilda took the staff from him with a snatch and stood prepared, her weight rolled forward on to the balls of her feet, the staff held in a defensive position.

For a moment, Robin felt a twinge of conscience, but he put it firmly aside. Her legs might be slim and shapely and he might have a sneaking admiration for that white, determined face, but he was not going to be ruled by a slip of a girl and convention - he'd put aside convention when he put himself aside from the law and gentle society. He might as well add one more sin to his list.

He struck out, just pulling short of the full weight of his normal blow. She blocked it, legs apart, grimly, then curved her parry, to shift his weight, hitting him swiftly.

Robin suddenly realised she was in earnest and intended to hurt him - whether to prove herself worthy or in revenge for the humiliation he had unthinkingly heaped on her - it did not matter. He was suddenly the defender and she the aggressor.

He backed away under the onslaught of blows offered at different angles and weights to keep him on the defensive, unable to second guess her. Finally, he struck back one blow that missed her defensive block, grazing her shoulder, then followed it, whilst she was off-balance, with one to the ribs and elbow, meaning to disarm her.

She cried out softly, but still gripped the staff grimly. Robin paused to see if she would stop the fight now, but found himself falling, a whoosh of air expelled violently from his lungs, as she on-ended him in the stomach. He toppled backwards into the stream.

He sat in the water, feeling a sense of deja vu. Matilda, her face unbecomingly flushed, her wild blonde curls plastered by sweat to her forehead, held out her staff with one arm, the other limply by her side.

He yanked her sharply into the water.

"Time to cool off your hot head!" He laughed at the irony of it.

She turned and sat on the hard pebbles, catching her breath, letting the cool crystal water soothe her. Then she reached over to hit him as hard as she could on the shoulder.

"Laugh at me, will you?" she yelled. "Go on, laugh. You're not the first."

"Laugh at you?" Robin asked, smiling. "I wouldn't dare! I was inviting you to laugh with me."

With a trickle of blood wending its way down the side of his face, dirt smudging his cheeks and red blotches from the fighting, drinking and laughter, he did not look attractive at all.

His eyes were gentle, though, as he met hers.

"Go home, Matilda," he said. "Look, there's something you'd better know. With Marion behind convent walls, I - well, I've taken a vow of celibacy..."

If she believed that, he thought, she'd believe anything. Still, he hoped desperately; he was at the stage where anything was precisely what he would try to persuade her to leave.

"Very well," she said, completely deadpan. "I can live with that. It's quite common; a couple my father knows did that last year. They go to various places of pilgrimage and pray a good deal. Prayer was not what I had in mind, but on reflection it probably wouldn't be wise for me to become pregnant out here anyway. If we ever change our minds, I suppose we could

apply for an annulment on the basis of non-consummation, which would be expensive and take time, but meanwhile -"

"Aargh!" he shrieked. "I give up! You are impossible!" He rose, dripping, and waded from the stream without even offering her a hand up.

She stood up, wincing, and found there was a hand extended to help her - a dark-skinned hand on the end of the Saracen's arm.

She took it and scrambled out.

"I will find you dry clothes," he offered, "and then you can come to me. I have an excellent balm that will ease the hurts."

"Thank you," she murmured.

He bowed. "You're welcome," he grinned, "my lady."

He left her gaping.

She accepted the dry clothes gratefully while hers were drying by the fire, changing in the cave and coming out in one of Nasir's lighter short-sleeved tunics and leggings. It was all rather too large for her, but comfortable and soft against her skin.

"I am on watch now," he told her. "You will have to come with me if I am to tend your bruises."

She followed him to his lookout spot, away from the others, and sat while he took up the pot of salve.

"Forgive me," he apologised, "in my country a man would not be doing this for you, but we have no women present..."

"Go ahead...How did you know, by the way? Were you listening?"

His teeth were white in his beard as he laughed. "No man not half-blind would ever mistake you for a male."

"The others did."

He shrugged. "They are Englishmen. Keep still while I work, please." He deftly applied the salve to the bruises on her arm.. "Now, in my country, we appreciate beauty - fine horses, fine steel, lovely women- "

"In your country," she grunted, "you lock them up. Thank you, but no. Not for me."

"But we are in England. And an eye for beauty does not change. Nor my admiration of spirit."

"It's not fair!" she muttered. "I waited for him. Turned down suitors in plenty, even though everyone insisted I was free. A marriage is a marriage."

"These troubadours," the Saracen purred, "it is all their fault. Love! Pah! Romance! Love comes from knowledge and sharing home and hearth, not from romance... You must forgive Robin. He was raised on the troubadours and romance. He thinks he loves Marion,

when it is only the idea of love that entrances him. But it was a shock. They were to be wed, you see, and that day they were separated by circumstances that made her believe him dead. When he found her again, she had decided to take the veil and would not change her mind. I think, me, that she never truly loved him. Perhaps if he were to see her again, he would realise this, but he makes her a shrine in his heart. Or perhaps -" he paused.

"Yes?"

"Perhaps they truly love and if this is the case, it is better that she comes to him and if that happens... Remember, there is a man here who admires spirit and is not blind."

He smiled at her and she was embarrassed to find her insides melting and a distinct throbbing in her loins.

He started to slip the soft shirt from her shoulder, revealing soft white skin, grazed - yet it was the imperfection that caused Nasir's indrawn breath.

Suddenly, the woman who had donned the clothes of a boy realised the impropriety of her situation.

"Sir," she said, drawing the fabric away from his fingers, "if you would but lend me your balm, I would see to my own wounds."

Nasir looked regretful. "As my lady wills,"

"My lady regretfully wills it, my dark and gentle knight."

His smile was a white flash in the darkness. He handed her the pot of balm, his fingers caressing hers for a moment as they touched.

She moved away, her mind full of questions.

She had defied convention by coming after her betrothed instead of having the betrothed put aside when Robert had become an outlaw. She had defied convention to study the arts of fighting and survival so that she could share his life with him. She had never questioned that they belonged together - yet this made her think of hidden things that her married friends spoke of. Running the manor's farms, she knew perfectly well what those things were, but only in a physical sense...

She had to know whether Nasir was right and if Robin truly loved his Marion; if he did, she would feel free. To do what, she was unsure, but at least it was a first step: to find Marion and bring her back to Robin - at arrowpoint, if necessary.

* * *

Robin's head and bruises reminded him of things he would rather have forgotten. How could he have done it? He groaned. He would go to her. He would apologise. He would -

Spend the next hour on his sleeping-mat, wanting to die. He'd forgotten how this felt; it was a long time since London and he'd spent it becoming a perfect gentle knight - the last thing he was, deep down.

He couldn't lead this band of wild men if he had been, after all. And Herne's son had to balance the powers of light and darkness; if he'd been all light, he would have been still living within the law, probably married to Matilda by now.

He wondered if she suspected.

Cold water - not rain, but a dunking - fell about him and he blinked awake, leaping up - - and wishing he hadn't - hand on his sword.

"If I were Sir Guy, you would be dead by now," Nasir growled.

"If you were Sir Guy, at least three of the watch would have to be dead - or would wish they were, if I got hold of them afterwards!" snapped Robin, pretending more strength and vigour than he had.

Nasir shrugged, looking disgustingly fresh for the early hour. "You would be in no position to do anything if you were dead." His eyes watched Robin as if he could see what he was hiding. "She's gone."

"What! But she -" Robin began before realising that he hadn't asked who "she" was - and that Nasir clearly knew.

"We have to find her. There'll be Sheriff's men everywhere today, after the tax cart, and there'll be those who won't ask who she is, or if she's broken any laws... can you track her?"

"Easily. She took the horse. But I think I know where she is going."

"Took the- ! Who was on watch the last part of the night?"

"You were," Nasir said blandly.

* * *

The priory sat serenely in its wooded setting. It was getting on for dawn when she arrived, walking the tired horse the rest of the way. From the chapel, she could hear the faint, sweet sound of the nuns singing the first service of the day.

What a life it would be, she thought. Peaceful, certainly. Gentle. A pleasant place to retire.

But for a young woman in the prime of life, surely it would be horribly dull.

She'd heard of larger houses, where the nuns could study, illuminate manuscripts, write books. Here, it would be all housework, embroidery and prayers.

"Oh, Marion!" she muttered. "You fool! How could you?"

She had to wait till the service was over before there was anyone to open the gate, but then a plump, jolly portress pulled it open to her knock.

The older woman blinked. "Sorry, love," she said. "We don't allow men in here, except under very special circumstances, but if you've a sister here, I can bring her-"

"Oh." Matilda had forgotten her male dress was actually a disguise. "No. I'm a woman. My name's Matilda. I had to dress this way for convenience in the woods and I've - er, lost my escort. Um, might I see to my horse first and then speak with Marion Of Leaford? She's a novice here."

The nun's cheerful face frowned. Of course, Marion being technically an outlaw still, they'd have to be careful about visitors wanting to see her.

"You'll have to speak with the Prioress first for that one, love. But, yes, bring your horse in and care for him. Poor thing, you've ridden him hard, haven't you?"

She chattered all the way to the stable, where the Priory's elderly mule shared living space with a pair of oxen used in the fields by the monks of the nearby sister house.

"Rest, my friend," she whispered in the animal's twitching ear. "You may have a harder trip back."

The Prioress was a pleasant, middle-aged woman. Matilda persuaded her that, although Marion didn't know her, she was no enemy. She even spoke Robin's name.

"No, he didn't send me," she admitted honestly. "But I'm here on his behalf - and hers - all the same."

"She's chosen this life, daughter," the Prioress said. "Whether it was for the right reason or not, I don't know - she still has a little time to decide that. But she has the right to think about it. Uninterrupted."

"Still, I'd like to see her. I want to know where she stands."

"Or where you do?" the Prioress asked perceptively.

"Or where I do," she agreed, thinking that it would never do to add that if she didn't find out, Marion would be returning with her, will she or nill she.

Marion had begun work among the bee-hives when Matilda was brought to her. It was not an ideal place to stage a kidnap; she'd have to do something about that.

"I'm Matilda Fitzwalter," she introduced herself. "If you don't mind, could we speak elsewhere? I'm sensitive to bee-stings."

Marion nodded. "We'll go to the herb garden." She led the way into a walled enclosure that had a door directly to the outside. Good.

"Now, then, what can I do for you?"

"I've just been with Robin," Matilda said without preamble.

Marion's face changed immediately. "If he's sent you to persuade me-"

"He didn't send me."

"Even worse." She sighed. "Listen, Matilda, every so often I get a female visitor who has taken one look at Robin's tragic face and decided to do the noble thing and persuade me to return. I'm sorry. I'd rather he had someone else and put me out of mind. I care for him, deeply. He saved my life and my sanity. I even thought I loved him, for a while, but it was only gratitude - and guilt for not loving him, when he'd done so much for me and been so gentle patient with my mourning for my husband. I can't help it - I don't love him and never have. And I suspect that if he were honest with himself, he'd find the same is true for him. So you'd do far better, if you aren't a relative, to go back, woo and win him. Take him, with my blessing."

"You don't understand," Matilda replied. "You see - you couldn't have married him without sinning, because he's been betrothed to me since childhood. For various reasons we couldn't wed and then he ran off into the forest. But he's still mine-"

"Surely you were both released when he became an outlaw!"

Matilda shook her head. "Not as far as I'm concerned. Now, I want to know if there's anything between you and I want him to see you again, so he can either give you up properly or take you back. If that happens, I'll go into a convent, which will release him. My father will be pleased it's been resolved. So will I, for that matter."

"And what I want doesn't matter?" Marion said sharply.

"I was afraid this would happen," Matilda said sadly. "Well, let's share a flask of mead, then, and I'll be on my way, and no hard feelings on either side. Though I really think-"

"I'll forgo the mead, thank you," Marion said, suspicious of this sudden meekness.

"Well, I like that! I have nowhere to go, you realise? Robin doesn't want me. My father will sell me off to some elderly knight. And you won't even drink with me. Very well, then, my lady, I'll go."

To get rid of her, Marion said, "All right. I'll fetch something, then. Wait here."

"I have something already." She waved a bottle she'd brought with her.

Marion knew she shouldn't share that drink, knew it in her bones. But surely the woman wouldn't be stupid enough to try poisoning her in her own home, surrounded by her fellow nuns. You're an outlaw still, remember? something reminded her. What could the nuns do?

All the same, she watched herself go off to fetch the cups, watched herself accept the one Matilda handed her. She saw Matilda raise her own cup and how her throat worked, then gulped down her own mead after a cautious sniff. She was a herbalist herself, but the smell and taste of honey drowned out anything else that might have been in it which shouldn't.

"Now, I must be back to work," she said, putting the cup down.

"Thank you for seeing me, even if..." A moment later, having succeeded in stalling Marion till the sleeping draught took effect, she caught the other woman as she slumped, lowering her gently to the bench.

"How did she ever survive all those years as an outlaw?" Matilda wondered aloud.

Frankly, she would have preferred to take her conscious, but she couldn't very well drag the woman all the way back to Sherwood at knifepoint; it would be easier to tie and load her this way.

She went to work quickly, using Marion's own veil and a rope she'd brought around her waist, and soon had her tied and gagged. Opening the door in the wall was the work of a minute; it was designed to keep intruders out, not inhabitants in. She lugged the unconscious woman out through the door and sat her against the wall. Then she stepped back in, re-locking the door.

Trying to stroll, she went back through the public areas of the convent and thanked the stablekeeper for looking after her horse.

Quickly, she saddled up and left through the front gate, then went around the side.

Getting Marion on to the horse was excruciatingly difficult, the more so because time was limited before she woke and began to struggle. She had to lead the animal to a nearby rock, put Marion on that, then drag her the rest of the way up and secure her with rope, like a sack of flour. Later, when they were too far away for Marion to return easily, she'd remove the gag and let her sit up.

The horse was a big one, strong and willing; she encouraged him with pats and whispers and they were soon away.

* * *

Robin loped through the forest, swift as a man could be on foot, but - on foot. Matilda had the horse. There was the cart horse that was going to take the tax money to Croxden, but it was not broken to rider and he really didn't have time to work on it, though he could more-or-less ride anything remotely equine. Besides, this was a personal matter. That tax money had to go now, before they had to fight more Sheriff's men for it. Too much blood had been spilled already to risk more - including his men's - for a woman who'd gone and done a stupid thing. But he was partly to blame; he'd pushed her away and perhaps she'd assumed he would be relieved to find her gone.

Hence, this personal quest; the others were headed for the abbey as originally planned. If she'd been taken by soldiers, of course-

He tried not to think about that.

As for Nasir... Robin cursed under his breath, words a nice young aristocrat really shouldn't know, especially one whose fair skin showed a blush so easily.

The Saracen had been unrepentant.

"I did not send her, my friend. I merely explained that your heart was still unavailable because the matter of you and Marion had never truly been resolved and that perhaps if you saw her again..." He shrugged. "If you don't want this woman, there are others who will. But simply telling her to go away will not help, because she will never believe herself free, under your strange infidel laws.

"I think, Robin, that she has gone to set herself free."

* * *

"You," said Marion, "are being absurd. So help me, if I get myself free, I'll -"

"Do nothing, unless you'd rather be carried all the way like a sack of wheat. I'm sorry. I promise I'll let you go when we reach Robin. But I had to do this. You gave me no choice. Really, Marion, you have no heart! I tried to make the best of my situation because I believe we're bound together, but you - you simply walked out because your nerves couldn't take it - after keeping the poor man dangling for two years - sometimes yes, sometimes no, sometimes maybe... Oh, yes, I've heard about that! I had a long talk with Tuck while I was in disguise. He wasn't accusing you of anything, just telling me about the band, but I could put two and two together."

"What do you know?" Marion snarled. "I had a heart; it broke. Twice. You try, sometime, having to leave your man when you know he's going to die, not even being able to go back and bury him, then, just when you've learned to care again, finding what you believe is your lover's body lying dead - and see how much heart you have left... For that matter, if you'd had any spirit, you'd have run off with some man of your own instead of waiting for Robin, who clearly wasn't coming back for you. Now, for heaven's sake, untie my legs at least."

"And have you take over the horse? Oh, no. You're coming to Robin with me and resolve things and then I'll be free, one way or another - and Robin won't be miserable any more."

For miserable he was. Marion was right in one respect - she, too, had been caught by his tragic face and wanted to make it better.

Stupid.

"If you don't -" Marion began, but Matilda cut her off with a raised hand. Marion listened with her. Hooves. The clank of mail and weapons. "Sheriff's men!" she hissed. "For God's sake, let me go! You're in no danger, but I'm still an outlaw!"

Matilda drew her knife and slashed the rope holding Marion to the horse and the veil tying her hands. Then she slid off the horse's back.

"Go!" she told the other woman. "I'll be all right." She handed her the knife.

Marion looked down. "I'll come back to you when I can."

Matilda hurried towards the sound of hoofbeats; if they seemed to be heading in Marion's direction, perhaps she could send them off the wrong way.

She broke through to the track just as Gisburne and his men came pounding along it. She'd intended to hide and watch for a minute or two before deciding, but she'd been seen and the sullen-faced knight was halting his horse, waving his men to do the same.

"You! Boy! Come here."

She approached, heart pounding.

"We're searching for outlaws who robbed the tax cart yesterday. Don't you realise how dangerous it is to be alone out here?"

A wave of relief washed through her.

"Yes, m'lord, but I had business at Halstead. My sister -"

"I really am not interested in your family life. Have you seen anyone or anything suspicious on your way?"

"Not just now, m'lord, but while I was on my way out, I did see a cart headed that way..." She pointed in a direction at random, "with these rough-looking' men drivin' it. There was boxes in it; I don't reckon it were a farm-cart."

She held her breath.

Gisburne swallowed the bait.

With a grunt and no word of thanks, he called his men to follow him in the direction she had indicated. She knew vaguely that there was a road somewhere in that direction, but couldn't recall where it led. No doubt some innocent carter would get a great shock for a few minutes, but Gisburne - whom she'd met once at a Christmas revel, where he'd bored her to tears with detailed descriptions of his tournament triumphs - knew what the outlaws looked like and wouldn't bother anyone else for long.

She was mildly amused not to be recognised, but then it had been only once, in a dim candlelit corner and he hadn't really been looking at her.

At this stage, if she continued on her way, she should reach the outlaw camp in a few hours, her mission unaccomplished. She'd get a little sleep, then head for home. Robin was right, if she stayed here and was found by her father, he and his men would simply be killed - and there would be more motive to hunt them.

She'd been walking for some time when she heard hoofbeats behind her again.

"Need a ride?" Marion's voice called.

She turned and stopped.

"Thank you. I think we'd better walk the poor beast for a while, though. He hasn't had any more sleep than I have and he's had to work a lot harder."

"Then we'll find a place to rest. I'm hungry and I see you have a little food and wine in these bags."

Matilda grinned. "That wine isn't drugged."

Marion gave a short laugh. "It had better not be!"

She led the way through the trees to a glade. There was a spring with a few stones heaped by it and a figurine of some ancient god, half-blurred, but with a withered garland hung over it; Herne was not the only pagan deity still worshipped hereabouts.

They unpacked the food, cared for the horse and sat to eat with sighs of relief. They didn't dare light a fire with Gisburne still poking around, so ate their meal cold.

"Thanks for letting me go," Marion began, "and for leading them away from me - I heard their horses crashing off somewhere."

"I wasn't going to let you be taken. I just wanted you to see Robin - just see him, once and for all. Nasir said he'd put you into a little shrine and wasn't going to let himself get over you, so I thought if he saw you once more -"

"Nasir said more than five words at a time?"

"Yes."

Marion laughed. "You're honoured, my lady. Every unwed woman in Wickham and beyond would give her right arm to have a flicker of interest from that man. He won't, though. To him, we're all immodest hussies here. He's kind, polite, but - silent. "

Matilda thought of last night, but said nothing of that.

"We were talking of Robin, though," she reminded Marion. "He won't have me. He even said some nonsense about having taken a vow of celibacy!"

Marion gave a hoot of laughter. "Robin? Celibate? He may look like a lost puppy, but -- that? Never! He's not even allowed to, as Herne's son. Herne blesses the crops every summer; he's the Mother's consort. Do you know what Robin's expected to do on May Eve?"

"I can guess."

"It's why he was so frustrated with me for so long. I - couldn't bring myself to - well, not till after he'd whisked me right out of King John's bedchamber and then only that once... I'll tell you the story someday..."

"Will there be the chance?" Matilda was serious again. "Marion, you two will have to make up your minds. I can't stand this any more."

"I've made up my mind, long ago... Are you serious that you only want him because he's your betrothed?"

"I don't know," Matilda sighed. "I last saw him when I was only thirteen, just before he went off to the Crusades. First love, I suppose. The trouble is, I've had all these years to dream, no chance to change my mind. And when I saw him again, even though we'd both grown up, it was the same. Anyway, it doesn't matter now. I suppose you'll want to get back to Halstead. I won't try to stop you, but you'll have to walk. The horse is Robin's and I'm not a thief."

Marion laid a hand on her arm. "We've come this far; I'll come the rest of the way."

* * *

He'd always vowed never to be caught alone and here he was, like an idiot, on his way to find a woman he didn't even want, staring out from among the leaves at the Sheriff's men. Dozens of them.

Well, not dozens, precisely. Gisburne had split up his men for the search and there were six or seven riding and tramping about below.

He didn't like killing them if he could avoid it, though he could have picked off most of them before he had to fight any individually. Village lads, most of them, doing duty for their lord, though he could see at least two hardened Brabançon mercenaries down there. Those he'd shoot with pleasure, but he'd still have to fight the others - and, if he survived, look their families in the eye afterwards.

How had he got himself into this, anyway?

He was ashamed to admit, he'd virtually forgotten Matilda since his early teens. There'd been the excitement of the trip to the Holy Land - and the atrocities he'd seen committed there by Christian knights, horrors that had made it a lot easier to accept Herne when the time came. One willing human sacrifice every so often seemed a lot less ugly than wholesale massacre of those who happened to live in territories you wanted. Chances were, he'd be the sacrifice next time one was wanted, anyway, so he needn't even feel guilty about that.

He'd deliberately lost himself on the way home. London had been for forgetting. He'd done whatever work he could get to keep himself alive. His strong body had been welcome on the riverside docks and no questions had been asked, though he was clearly an aristocrat.

In between, he'd plunged into the fleshpots. Amazing, really, that he hadn't caught anything nasty or ended up dying of alcohol poisoning.

What had sent him back, eventually, had been the words of a prostitute he knew in that underworld.

"I have to do this, lad - me 'usband's dead and I got three littl'uns. You got a home and a Da, waiting for yer - why're you 'ere?"

Why indeed? Especially since nothing he'd done had made him forget. Now he knew that it had given him that shading he needed for the balance of light and dark required of Herne's son. It had shown him a side of the world he would never have known otherwise and given him compassion for the helpless.

Back then, though, he'd only thought himself a fool. Like the Prodigal Son he'd returned home, but no fatted calf awaited him, only a blistering tongue-lashing and his first reminder of Matilda.

"What am I supposed to tell your betrothed's father? You aren't worthy of her any more - if you ever were. If he finds out what you've been up to ..."

So, of course, they'd gone on putting off the wedding, hoping the story of his disgrace would fade.

And then he'd seen a sad-faced young woman at his father's feast and it had been too late...

Yet now he was remembering the time he'd spent, just before going away, with a girl whose long, wavy hair was always getting tangled because of its curliness, flying like a golden banner as they rode, refusing to stay in its decorous braids. He was recalling vivid green eyes laughing into his, and long nights in the hall, at the hearth, intelligent conversations - she'd been getting an education at the local convent and knew more than most girls he'd met. Together, they'd read the Breton lais of Marie De France, with their long-lost children, fairy queens, hawk lovers and virtuous werewolves; he remembered the firelight on her face as she read aloud. They'd both been very young, but he remembered thinking, at the time, that if he had to wed, it could have been a lot worse.

Then he'd spent two patient years wooing a woman still grieving for her dead husband - two wasted years, it seemed. He was beginning to realise that Marion would never be able to let her first man go, because of the way he had died and not having been able to stay with him to the last. He also knew, in his heart, she had never really loved him, Robert, despite that one time when, both of them in a good humour after her narrow escape from the king, they had found a grassy bank near the camp and made joyous love. Next morning, though, it had been back to normal.

He'd have minded less if she'd been able to make up her mind instead of dithering about, telling him she loved him one day and begging him to give her time the next.

The youthful soldiers crashed off through the undergrowth, followed by the Brabançons. He gave it another fifteen minutes, then slipped from his tree and continued on his way.

When another Brabançon bumped into him, he fought and killed the man almost absently, before he could call for help, and hid the body - wouldn't do to have the others know he was there.

He was running silently, lightly; no one should have heard him. Gisburne's men were making enough noise to be heard a mile away, and avoided.

All the same, they came barging through the trees and took him; pure luck had served them where woodcraft had failed him.

* * *

The overladen horse came within sight of the track leading to Croxden Abbey.

"We might run into the band," Matilda said. "They were taking the tax cart to Croxden today. Perhaps we won't even need to go as far as the camp."

"Perhaps. Though if I know Robin, he'll be looking for you."

"I doubt it. He'll assume I've done as ordered and gone home."

"Do you really think he'd let you go on your own? There are far too many dangers for someone new to the forest. For that matter, how you escaped wild beasts and real outlaws on the way out -"

"Look! It's the tax cart and our lads!" Matilda said suddenly, pointing to a distant speck.

Marion peered. "You have good eyesight. Yes, you're right."

Matilda urged the horse forward until they were within plain sight of the cart and Marion waved.

The men were surprised but pleased.

Marion! You're back!" Much cried happily.

"Yes, well, it's a long story," she said, not looking at Matilda. "I'll tell it later. Where's Robin?"

"He went lookin' for young Matthew here," John said. "Look, lad, it weren't right, you runnin' off like that. I reckon he felt guilty for being against you. It's dangerous out 'ere for a lad your age on 'is own."

"Your eyesight needs improving," Marion said drily. "My friends, this is the Lady Matilda Fitzwalter, who, I believe, has a prior claim on our Robin. Really, Will, you'd best close that mouth before flies drop in... Which way did Robin go?"

"He was going to Halstead," Nasir said, with an apologetic glance at Matilda. "I told him that was where you would go, Matilda. He knew he could not hope to catch up with the horse, so he was taking a shorter route, by Darkmere."

"Darkmere way!" Marion exclaimed. "We met Sheriff's men down there!"

"Oh, no!" groaned Matilda. "I think I sent Gisburne towards him."

They all stared at her. "Well, I was trying to steer them away from Marion!" she said defensively. "How was I to know?"

After a brief discussion, they hid the cart and turned the horses out to graze; they were used to going on foot anyway. Bows were strung, swords came out. Marion kilted her habit about her to make running easier. They gave her a spare sword that had belonged to one of the guards and she stuck it through her girdle. Matilda didn't get one despite her protests - "You'd better stay at a distance, lass, you're not used to this," John said kindly, though only the day before he'd been applauding "Matthew's" valour - but, at her insistence, they gave her a bow, since she'd left hers at camp. It was a guard's light crossbow, but she'd handled those many times in hunting at home.

She ran with the others, marvelling at their speed and stamina. Of course, they'd had some years to get this fit. She was good herself, having worked hard at it, but not as good as they were. Yet.

Still, she valiantly tried to keep up, praying that Robin would be safe - or able to be rescued. The alternative, she didn't like to contemplate.

* * *

What he was feeling, at this moment, was a right fool. It was almost enough to tempt him to turn in his hood. His predecessor had always eluded his pursuers and kept his band, as a whole, free, unless you counted the time John had overstayed in Wickham and been taken. Since his own coming to the forest, they'd been taken, en masse, three times. Usually, though, he'd been free to rescue them - but now it was his turn. How could he have been taken so easily?

Oh, he'd given them a fight, but, romances to the contrary, one man couldn't defeat a dozen, not even with a magical sword made by Wayland Smith. The only reason he was even alive, he supposed, was because Gisburne wanted him that way. For now.

There he was, sneering and gloating, holding Albion. He knew better, now, than to use it against its master, but that didn't mean he couldn't use it for other things. Robin supposed he was currently telling him of the "delights" awaiting him in Nottingham, but he was trying to blot the man out and consider ways of escape.

He twisted his hands in their bonds, but being tied to the saddle of a horse made it difficult, as he was constantly being jerked along.

Escape, when it came, was sudden and totally unexpected. A crossbow quarrel hit Gisburne's wrist. He was wearing heavy gloves, and it glanced off, but it stung enough to make him curse and wrestle with his startled horse.

Robin threw himself to the side, the rope tying him to Gisburne's saddle coming loose. The air was filled with arrows as the soldiers went into action.

Gisburne rode at him, but he'd freed himself and dodged easily. The only sword the knight had was Albion, as he'd put it into his scabbard. Forgetting, he drew it - and dropped it with a scream and a blistering oath.

Robin didn't need inviting twice. Snatching up his sword, he plunged into the fight.

Among his men, he saw two women - Matilda, damn her, and Marion, her novices habit hitched up, red hair tossing as she fought. Matilda it was who had the crossbow and was calmly standing on a low tree-branch re-loading, cocking and firing.

He fought on. Gisburne had snatched a sword from one of his soldiers, leaving the poor man to fight as best he could without, and was charging back at his foe. Robin parried the blow and leapt for the horse, trying to unseat Guy; desperate he might be, but not yet desperate enough to commit fratricide.

It might have made things so much simpler if Guy had known -

But no. The man would probably try even harder to kill him, in case the embarrassing fact ever came to light, while knowing he had an advantage.

Gisburne, a superb horseman, was not easily unseated. They struggled, while the beast plunged.

But finally, they fell off together, still locked in struggle. Albion lay on the ground again as they wrestled. With a mighty heave, he managed to get close enough to reach it. Guy's helmet had rolled off in the struggle. The great sword's hilt came down on his head, rendering him unconscious.

Staggering to his feet, Robin saw that the fighting was almost over. Two of the soldiers were fighting Will and John, but looked exhausted. They were very young.

"Let them go," he said wearily. "I know them."

The fighting stropped. "Edward. Martin," he said to the two young soldiers, "take Sir Guy home. He's alive. I couldn't face your mothers if you were killed."

"We dasn't go, Robin," the youth called Martin said. "Sir Guy'll be that angry ..."

"Tell him I threatened you. He'll shout, but that's all. Like the rest of us, he'd rather be alive than dead."

"There are others -"

"They won't catch us now. And Sir Guy will wake with such a headache, he won't care. Go!"

They heaved up their commander on to his horse and went.

He saw Matilda looking at him wonderingly.

"Sometimes," he remarked, "fighting for truth and justice isn't all black and white and Sheriff's men aren't faceless villains."

He said nothing more to her just then. Turning to Marion, he fell into her arms like a swimmer staggering from a heavy sea, blessing the land.

"Well, that answers that question," Matilda muttered after she'd got over her initial wave of hurt and anger. She turned away.

"It's so good to see you," Robin was murmuring to Marion. "Did Matilda ask you to come?"

"'Abducted' would be a more appropriate word. But I'm not sorry. It seems you needed an extra sword here!" She smiled suddenly. "What the Prioress will say I've no idea. I'll have to get back soon or she'll be worried."

"We'll send Much ahead to let her know you're well." He glanced over at his men. "Thank you all... Let's finish off here and go back to the cart." To Marion: "We must talk. Matilda really kidnapped you?"

"She did. But I came the last part of the way willingly...Robin, I'm sorry, but my feelings haven't changed. I'm staying where I am."

"And these days, I wonder about my own feelings... I wonder if I hadn't been hearing too many romantic ballads, in which the hero always falls in love with the maiden he rescues... I - think what I felt for you first was sympathy, pity, then admiration and - quite frankly, lust!"

She laughed. "That, at least, was mutual!"

"But I made the mistake of confusing the troubadours' songs with real life. And I never gave even a second thought to the girl I last saw just before I was dragged off to the Holy Land. That was an arranged marriage, after all, and those didn't play any role in the chansons, except as a background to adulterous romance."

"The woman's remarkable, Robin! Insane, absurd, yes, but - she took the trouble to prepare herself for your lifestyle, because she knew you'd never be able to return to hers -"

"She threatened to kill a king's deer if that's what it took," he said with a reminiscent grin.

"Did she? And then she came after me so you and I could get things straight!"

"I can't bring a woman into this life, Marion; you were the exception, because of the danger to you in staying at home. But it would be asking too much... Her father's probably turning England upside down for her already!"

" Well, it may be too late; Gisburne has seen her; he took her for a boy, but they'd met before, she tells me, and later it may come back to him... Where is she, by the way?"

"She's gone," Will said, hearing her. "Took one o'the soldiers''orses. She was cryin', for pity's sake! What's goin' on around 'ere, eh?"

"She must have seen you hugging me and come to the wrong conclusion," Marion said. "And I let you! You didn't even thank her for helping to save your life, did you?" She saw his face. Stamped with fury. "Oh, you fool! Men! Go after her, this minute!"

Robin, actually the most kind-hearted of men, was feeling a lot worse than a fool at this moment. Even if he didn't want to marry Matilda, he told himself sternly, he'd behaved like an oaf the last two days - with the best of intentions, genuinely not wanting her to suffer this life - but an oaf all the same.

It was simply that, well, no woman had ever come after him before and he hadn't known how to handle it.

His Uncle Edgar could have told him about the women who'd come to their tent door in the Holy Land, not all of them camp followers, but Edgar was dead and gone.

He grabbed another horse from the startled Will and rode off.

* * *

She did not, after all, head for Halstead. Home first, she thought, to reassure her father and let him know her plans. He'd have to pay a dowry to get her into a convent, but it would still be cheaper than marriage and he could then dispose of his estates as he saw fit, without the uncertainty. She'd been unfair to him, she knew - and for what?

Now, the only way to free everyone was the cloister. Then he could have his Marion - whom she had found herself liking, unexpectedly - and everyone would live happily ever after.

Well, not exactly. But there were some interesting German convents where one could study astronomy, compose music and write books about philosophy...

Better than embroidery. She hated embroidery.

She spent a night at a monastic guest-house on the way and traded her horse while she was about it; the dealer was shady and his re-mount not as good, but better that than risk being caught with a horse belonging to Nottingham castle.

She didn't know that another such horse was pounding the road behind her.

He'd lost time going to Halstead, where they told him that, no, the boyish stranger hadn't returned and by the way, where in heaven's name was Marion, who hadn't been seen since morning?

He reassured them about Marion and deduced that there was only one other place where Matilda could have gone.

It was dangerous for him, but he owed it to her.

* * *

She got the expected tongue-lashing.

"Do you know the trouble you've caused? There'll be no more nonsense from you, my girl. A few weeks to be sure you're not with child and then -"

"We never -" she began, but her father cut her off.

" - and then, if we've been spared that particular humiliation, off to a convent with you! If not, I'll find you some wild Welsh lord to wed and pack you off as far as possible, where the gossip won't matter. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Father," she said meekly.

There was more, just to make him feel better, and to cover his relief at having her back unharmed, then he'd sent her off with her women to be cleaned up and dressed properly.

It would all have worked out well but for two events. The first was the arrival of Robin.

Of course, being outlawed now, he couldn't very well turn up at the front gate. After all his experience slipping into Nottingham castle, he had no difficulty getting into this one.

Her window was narrow, but just wide enough for him to climb through.

"Did Marion turn you down, then?" she snapped, after her initial shock at seeing him on the ledge.

"You don't understand! We -"

"Go away!"

"Matilda, please! Listen! I -"

"I said, begone! Or I'll push you, so help me!"

"You wouldn't do that," he said confidently, but on second thoughts slid into the room. Just in case.

"That or call the guards. Don't try me. At least if you were killed I could marry."

"Who?"

"Nasir for one. Just before I left, he said he'd wed me gladly. 'And if you ever tire of me, o, moon of my delight,'" she quoted, "' I can free you instantly, unlike these Nazarenes.'"

"I'll kill him!"

"Not if I call the guards you won't," she said sweetly.

"Very well, I'll go. And I really will take a vow of celibacy!"

"You can't. Marion told me about that. You're Herne's son, priest of a fertility god. I even know about your May Eve ... duties."

"I hoped you wouldn't find out about that," he said sheepishly. "Matilda, at least listen! You were right. When I saw Marion again, I knew what I hadn't been able to see before, and so did she. We're dear friends now - but no more. She sent me after you."

"I might have known you hadn't decided to do it yourself. Go away."

He went, but he didn't leave the castle. Just as well, as it turned out.

For the next event was the arrival of Guy of Gisburne, passing through on his way to a tournament. Of course, he stopped for a night's hospitality with his stepfather's old friend, Lord Fitzwalter. And, of course, Lord Fitzwalter's daughter was expected to entertain.

Her hair hadn't grown out, so she wore a veil and hoped he wouldn't notice. She'd explained to her father, who had no time to listen, but said, "Oh, nonsense! He's not the observant type, except for horses - if you were a mare, he might notice, perhaps! And you're dressed as a woman again."

At first, he didn't notice, although he said, "Strange, there's something familiar about you, my lady."

"Of course," she said. "We met at Christmas one year. You were telling me about your wonderful tournament scores, remember?"

Which led to his telling them some more and boasting about the knights he meant to defeat this time around.

And then she made her mistake.

"Why the bandage on your head, my lord?" she asked politely. She knew perfectly well, but had had enough of his tournament victories.

"An encounter with outlaws, my lady," he began, all ready to concoct a tale in which he would come out as the hero and attract some admiration in those gold-fringed forest-coloured eyes.

And then the memory came back. A blonde, curly-haired lad with those same eyes, on the road. The same boy shooting a crossbow during the fight...

Suddenly, he leaned across the table and pulled off her veil.

"Sir Guy! How dare you!" Lord Fitzwalter protested, genuinely shocked. He rose indignantly, standing between Matilda and Gisburne.

"I dare because this - lady - was fighting with the outlaws only a few days ago. Only, she was dressed as a boy, as I recall. An entire quarter's taxes, gone! As representative of the Sheriff of Nottingham, I am authorised to arrest you, Lady Matilda, and take you back to Nottingham castle. My lord, if you try to prevent me doing my duty, I will have have to assume that you knew what your daughter was about and arrest you also. Now, stand aside and, my lady, come with me."

"Not without a fight!" She pulled an ancestral sword from the wall, kicking her skirts back. This stupid dress would be the death of her, she thought, but faced Gisburne boldly all the same.

One of the men bringing in logs for the hearth dropped them and turned suddenly, drawing his hidden sword.

"Amen to that!" Robin cried and leapt for Gisburne.

Lord Fitzwalter looked on, bewildered, at the fight between his guest and his supposed servant.

"Young man, I don't know who hired you, but you're dismissed!" he shouted as the two men passed him in their duel. "How dare you fight in my house!"

"I resign," Robin called back, then, to Matilda, "For pity's sake, go!"

But Gisburne's escort were pouring in now. With two slashes, the young woman slit her lower skirts and joined in the fray, stopping only to call her father's guards.

"I'm sorry, Father," she said in a momentary lull.

"Oh, go, child! We'll find a way around this - I have no intention of taking to the forest myself... You would have been a poor nun anyway."

She ran to join Robin, who was busy knocking over Gisburne and throwing down a chair to hold him momentarily. He grabbed her arm and they ran.

"That," she puffed, "is the second time I've seen you spare Gisburne's life. Why?"

"He's my brother."

"Ask a stupid question ..."

He didn't reply. Perhaps he was conserving his breath.

Outside, they hurried across the courtyard.

"I have a horse out in the woods," he said, "if no one has found it by now."

"Then go. I'll join you."

"I'm not letting you out of my sight."

She rolled her eyes, exasperated. "This is my home. Do you think the grooms will deny me my own horse? Now go!"

He obeyed.

Shortly after he'd found and caught his own beast and saddled it, she appeared on a bay mare.

"You didn't mean it about killing Nasir?" she asked anxiously when they were well on their way and safe enough to walk their mounts..

"You didn't mean it about marrying him?"

"No!" they said in unison.

They laughed.

"Actually," she said, still giggling, "I'm not sure he meant it about marrying me. Well, my refusal didn't break his heart, anyway. But the proposal did wonders for my self-esteem, which, believe me, was low at the time!"

"You don't need any more reassuring," he answered, leaning over from his mount to kiss her.

"Mm, no, I suppose not, but don't tempt me."

"Tempt?"

"You really don't know, do you, the effect you have on women? Anyway, I've waited this long and at this stage, I want to wait until the words are spoken, just to make it all the more enjoyable."

He laughed. "I wasn't proposing to try it on horseback!"

"Another kiss like that and I'd have pushed you on to the ground and taken you there and then!"

They reached Sherwood without further incident. The others had delivered the tax money and returned to camp. Marion had left for Halstead, unable to put off her duties there any longer.

As they dismounted and led their horses to food and water, Robin pointed at Tuck. "You. You're marrying us tonight, at Wickham."

"But the banns -" he protested.

"Then call them."

With a sense of deja vu, he sighed and obeyed.

When they passed Nasir, Robin pointed again. "And you -" The Saracen's eyes twinkled at him. " - are on last watch tonight," he finished lamely.

Nasir gave his silent laugh. As Matilda looked at him, he winked.

When they had finished tending the horses, she remarked ruefully, "What a sight I must be! I can clean up, but... I had hoped for a prettier wedding-gown." She gazed down at her ruined skirts.

"There's one of Marion's in the cave, that should fit you. Finest Byzantine silk." She wondered why he was grinning. "I'll get it for you now."

At that moment, they heard, faint, distant, but unmistakable, the howl of a wolf.

"Oh, no!" he groaned, then grabbed her wrist. "Come! Forget the gown! We're getting married now!"

"What! But I thought -"

"This minute! I'll explain later."

As they ran back to the camp, she wondered what had prompted this sudden haste, but smiled to herself. It was bound to be an interesting story...

END.

Authors' Note: *There really was a Lady Matilda Fitzwalter in the thirteenth century, daughter of one of King John's Barons and associated, by some, with Maid Marion (unlikely, since Marion only joined Robin's band with the fifteenth century May Day games).*

This is not that Matilda. We just liked the name and couldn't resist the association.

A SECRETARY'S WOES

By Jenny McLean

Well, here I am again. Back in Rick and AJ Simon's office, cleaning up what they jokingly refer to as paperwork.

You may wonder what I'm doing messing around with a couple of private investigators. I wonder myself. It's not as if I need the money, thank goodness.

I'm a temporary secretary, that's what I do for a living. I don't have to count on it, as I said, which is fine by me, but it's fun and a good way of keeping my hand in. You see, I had a rich relative (I know, it sounds cliched, but it's true!), who left me some money. My name is Sandra Broderick and I do temping occasionally, working for all sorts of interesting people. Nonetheless, I suppose, being Rick and AJ.

Having worked for them before I guess they must have liked me, because they asked for me again, and so it went on. Well, I'm not that silly. They are kind of cute, not that I'd tell them that. Just that every now and then they need someone to clean up after them.

They do offer a certain amount of excitement and variety. I'm talking about the work here, not them! But then again ... They should be banned from wearing jeans! But that's digressing.

How they survived as a business, I'll never know. They usually need me around tax time at Christmas, and sometimes during the middle of the year, around June. So I see them about twice a year now. They did offer me a permanent position, but after the episode of having my car bombed and then when I got shot in the arm ... I decided twice a year was enough.

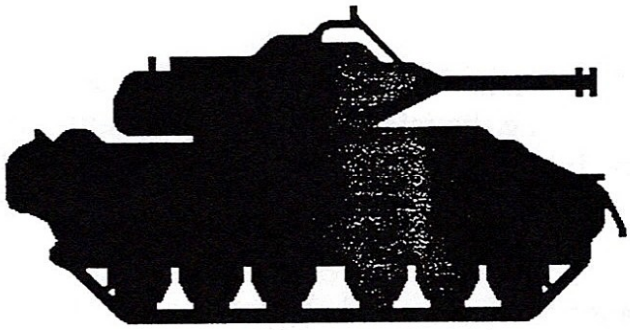
And they thought I was strange because I liked science fiction and went to conventions! Rick always ribs me about going to cons, until I called his bluff once and dared him to come with me to the next one. To my shock he took me up on it. How was I going to explain him to my friends! AJ simply tried to ignore it, hoping it would all go away.

AJ had told me I shouldn't dare him to do anything. So I opened my big mouth! It had taken me a couple of days to get used to Rick. The way he carried that .44 around all the time made me a little nervous.

They're really friendly guys though; willing to help. However their idea of helping with the paperwork was not my idea! I was usually relieved when they went out of the office and left me alone to do my work ...

So, diary, that's what I do for a living. My New Year's resolution is to start writing things down, because nobody believes me when I tell them. They think I make up these characters in my head. Believe me, I could never make up Rick and AJ Simon if I tried! Not even my SF buddies believe me! Until they saw Rick. And, I couldn't create all their adventures; that's all their own handiwork. I just wish they would leave their work on their side of the desk, and leave me to do mine!

So, why am I still there, diary! Good question; I think I need a therapist. I know, I know, they'll ask me why I'm still there, why I still say "yes" whenever I pick up the phone and hear Rick asking me to come down! Oh well, it's a living. I guess ... Someone's got to do it.



GOOD KNIGHT, SWEET PRINCE

by Susan Clarke

It was hot.

As the disorientation he felt made him feel giddy, he realised that it was augmented by the heat. Yet no sweat broke out on his brow. Perhaps he was already too dehydrated to sweat. He tried to turn in the darkness: it was suffocatingly hot.

He was curled in a foetal position and completely enclosed. For a moment, panic reined foremost in his mind. Out, he had to get out. He let his hand reach out and feel, fingertips burning against the hot metal. Too hot.

He allowed his body to fold back into its curve. He wanted out, but somehow it seemed safer to suffer the heat.

Where the hell was he? A box? What?

No, the smell was vaguely familiar... oil and grease and...

A car boot!

What the hell was he doing in a car boot? Once more he reached above him, feeling the curve of the metal. He was facing away from the opening. He tried to turn himself but a man his size was not meant to be fitted into a baggage compartment and expect to be able to turn over.

He started to slide and move and manipulate himself, only his knees seem to have a will of their own.

Then he felt the vehicle begin to vibrate and adrenalin began to move in his body - fear? excitement? He didn't know.

He managed to face the handle side of the compartment - he really didn't know how he did - and felt round to find, to his surprise, a handle inside. He turned it to find that it was unlocked.

A small strip of sunlight knifed the darkness to fall across his cheek and shoulder - an exquisite pain. He felt his scream move up through his body, dropping the boot handle abruptly.

Then he curled into himself, hugging his pain, not daring yet to touch fingertips to wound.

What did it mean? Pain, heat and a thirst that was beginning to grow in him. His mind couldn't even focus on his own questions; it was like a hell that he didn't want to have to stay in. He wanted to leave, but rather he wanted everything to leave him... to leave him alone.

He was tired, so tired. Was he never going to rest?

He tried to not to think, not to feel, but to envelope himself in the blackness within the confined area - almost willing himself back to the womb.

The car swung him from side to side, as well as vibrating, then suddenly was still.

He could hear the sound of the tyres pulling up on cement; then a door being closed... a garage door? Then the sound of heels - high heels stepping out, and circling the car. He closed his eyes and saw in his mind long slender legs, going up. The pain seemed to fade with his vision.

Then his blood seemed to chill. He could hear the boot being opened.

"No!" he cried, waiting for the pain... but none came.

Instead, a gentle voice asked, "Are you all right, Nick?"

He turned his head and looked at her. They were obviously inside a garage. He nodded and slowly unfolded himself from the boot.

She had turned and led the way into an apartmemt... the shutters were closed and the light inside was low, and the rooms seemed austere. Sam did not speak, but followed her lead, his head full of questions... His name was Nick, but why had he been hidden in a car boot? Why had he been burnt by the sun? What was he here for?

He felt the need to be closer to another human being right now. He was so confused.

And she was beautiful. With his whole body, he reacted to her unique beauty - shining bright brown eyes, and deep brown hair that bounced with a life of its own. It was her vitality that he felt attract him. She drawled her words without any sexual nuance at all, yet, he could feel her pull.

"Are you all right?" she asked again, a frown tracing across her forehead.

Almost unwillingly, as if mesmerised, he reached out a hand and traced the line, erasing it as she smiled. His fingertips continued to caress her, outlining her cheeks, and chin, lingering on her lips. He could feel her breath whisper against his fingertips. She was intrigued, and a little puzzled, but willing him to continue.

He moved closer without touching his body to hers, bringing his face closer until his lips replaced his fingertips and he gently sucked in the fragrance of her breath. She was so alive, so beautiful.

From somewhere deep within his throat he made a sound something like a purr. He could feel her react to the sound, a sigh softly whispered between barely parted lips.

"Why, Nick?" she asked, but her reactions told him that she was not complaining, just curious. He could cure her of that, he realised. She would be as lost as he was himself to this sensation.

He caressed her lips with his own, then moved them, tracing lightly with his tongue, breathing gentle, hot breathes across her skin. He could feel her starting to fold towards him, surrendering.

His mouth followed the hot beating of her blood, up her neck to just below her jawline. Her sigh was intoxicating. He felt alive and yearning. He opened his lips over that warm, pulsing part of her neck, touching his tongue to it. He could feel it tingle the tip of his tongue and he caressed it again, aware of the sensual shivering of the woman. It was his only touch with her, yet he could

feel her length pressed hotly to him... yet... not touching him. He sighed, breathing in her sweet perfume. He was not thinking, just reacting... and something more... savouring, hot and excitedly.

"No, Sam!"

It was Al, of course. Sam pulled back only slightly, but reached out to draw her closer, protectively. She seemed so vulnerable in her sexual thrall. Her eyes, through partially closed lids, were bright with wanting. He looked over her shoulder at Al's appearance.

For some reason, Al looked frightened. "You're holding Dr Natalie Lambert, a noted pathologist according to the records."

"Natalie," Sam breathed the name between his lips, letting the warm breath caress her ear.

"Nick..." she answered back, her eyes closed in pleasure.

"Let her go, Sam." Al was moving slowly towards them. It was almost as if he was telling Sam to put down the gun, or move away from the edge.

"Why?" Sam asked, confused, unwilling to let her go.

"Let her go, Sam," Al insisted.

"Why have we never done this before?" she asked, a smile in her voice. "I don't know, Nick. I thought it mightn't be a good idea, with your... problem... but right now, it feels right."

Nick found himself returning to her eyes, losing himself in their depths for just a moment.

"Right?" Al looked at her as if disgusted. "Sam, you're a policeman, Detective Nick Knight, and the doctor here is helping you cope with a severe skin problem you have.... some sort of allergy to the sun.... hence the dark room." He paused, then started again. "Move away from her, Sam."

Sam looked annoyed, not understanding, and unwilling to lose this precious contact. "I don't feel sick," he said, both to her and to Al at the same time.

"Sick?" At once Natalie looked concerned. She seemed to examine him with her eyes with a clinical interest now. Sam could feel the moment moving away from him, and he looked at Al with acusation. "I knew you must have gotten some sun this morning... I got to you as quickly as I could and when I saw that you were already in the car, I drove you home as soon as possible. Which reminds me... " She looked at her watch suddenly. "... I'm supposed to be at work." Her look was completely regretful. "I'd like to explore this further, but I thought you didn't want to... well, that it might get out of hand and..." She seemed at a loss, then abruptly, she hooked a bang of hair behind her ear almost nervously and stood waiting, as if wavering between kissing him goodbye or just leaving.

Sam took matters into his own hands again, and pulled her close again, kissing her quickly. "Take care," he murmured in an intimate tone.

"Yes, well, keep inside and get some rest," she said, then abruptly left.

Sam watched her with appreciation and a smile. "At least the hormones are working," he remarked quietly.

"That's disgusting," Al growled.

Sam grinned at him, realising that Al was swallowing anything he told him right at this moment. "At least I know this Nick Knight isn't impotent."

Al threw his hands up in a wildly Italian gesture and chewed his cigar aggressively.

Sam moved towards the fridge, realising that his thirst had ebbed but not abated. The door of the small fridge swung open revealing empty shelves except for a row of unmarked wine bottles, all carefully plugged with a long cork.

Al looked over his shoulder at the lack of contents. "He's a lush," he muttered.

Aways trying to look on the best side of people, Sam offered, "Could be pay day."

"Sure, and he brews home-made red wine in the bath-tub," Al muttered.

"I'm sure your grandfather did during prohibition." Sam remarked, pulling out a bottle.

"Everyone's grandfather did," Al answered watching Sam with a kind of horrified fascination. "You can't drink that. You don't know what's in it."

It didn't seem to matter. The thirst that seemed to come and haunt him in waves was making his hands shake. He had began to feel incredibly weak. He pulled out the cork, and swallowed the liquid without tasting it.

"It looks too thick for wine, Sam. What are you doing?" Al's voice rose.

Sam swallowed deeply, feeling comfort in the liquid's progress down his throat. His mouth registered the thick, almost metallic taste. It was strange, familiar, but not unpleasant.... not now when he was so thirsty.

His head spun, as if lightheaded. It was intoxicating. He breathed out a long, shakey breath, then crossed to the lounge with the almost empty bottle.

Al looked at it, bending closer, wanting to sniff it, but knowing it was impossible. He had never been so frustrated before... well, maybe once or twice. If nothing, he was honest with himself at times.

He pulled back from the bottle with a look of horror on his face. "It's blood, Sam. You've got to stop drinking that stuff."

"I know it tastes strange, but don't be ridiculous, Al. If it was blood, I'd be able to tell.... it tastes more like tonic... I think..." But he seemed to be somewhat intoxicated by the taste and put the bottle to his lips to finish its contents.

"Sam, I know what I'm talking about," Al started, pleading.

"Sure, you've often had a bottle of blood or two in the fridge... decanted in wine bottles of course. Go away, Al, unless you have something for me. I'm tired."

He yawned, sprawling his long length along the sofa. He snuggled down to rest his head on the arm and closed his eyes.

"That was good stuff."

"Sam, Sam, listen to me. I've seen Nick Knight... back at the waiting room... I've seen him and... you've got to..." But he was talking to a gently sleeping body.

"Oh sheet," he swore, and punch out a command, disappearing through the invisible door with a glow.

* * *

Nick Knight was sitting on the edge of the bed wearing Sam's body; examining it as if it were a new set of clothes he's just gotten into and he wasn't at all sure whether he liked the set of the shoulders, or the way they pulled at the thighs. He had removed Sam's overall and was naked.

Al hurried over with a robe, then remembered, standing back from him and holding it out at arm's length. About his neck, a brightly polished silver cross caught the light and Nick's eye.

Nick smiled. It was amusing. He had not been so harmless since the Crusades... but even then he's been formidable. No, he's never been so harmless.

"You must forgive me," he explained in his most cultured voice; the one he used for impressing people. "I was comfortable in my previous body. I'd had it a long time and was quite used to it." He looked down at Sam's lean length. "Although, as a substitute, this one is quite adequate."

"It's a loaner only," Al said with a snap of defiance. The robe still dangled from his hand, and he threw it to the end of the bed. "Cover up." He was used to command and Nick recognised it. Unfortunately for Al, so was Nick.

He ignored the robe.

"Are you saying that I will have to return to my own body eventually?" he asked, his eyes trying to will Al to submission.

It didn't work. "When you return, this will be like a dream. I am not at liberty to tell you anything more than that." Al was quietly determined. Even in his brilliant yellow and black-trimmed suit which he wore like a defiant statement, he was a man who demanded respect.

Nick stood slowly, coming towards Al. They stared at each other without expression. Somewhere in the back of Al's mind he tried to imagine this play with Sam --- after all it was Sam's body he saw --- but couldn't. They were two powerful personalities, challenging each other. And Al, was hiding a strong fear of this... creature.

Nick suddenly smiled and held out his hand. "My name is Nicholas Knight. And you are?"

Al just looked at his hand, not wanting to make the normal gesture of greeting with someone who had tried to attack him when he first arrived, then had bottles of blood (he thought) in his fridge for midnight snacks. Then he took it. "Admiral Albert Calavicci," he supplied abruptly.

"Now, Admiral," Nick turned and started to shrug into the robe. "Are you sure you can't tell me where I am, and why I'm only borrowing this body for the moment?"

"Quite sure," Al answered abruptly watching Nick tie the robe at the waist. "You'll have to get back into the overall shortly, when we know you are going back." It was a statement and meant to put Nick into his place of a temporary resident.

Nick stretched as if savouring the feel of the robe moving against his flesh. He looked about the stark, empty room and realised that the admiral was all the company he was going to get for the moment. Then curiosity led him to ask, "Could I possibly request something to eat and drink? Or is the prisoner allowed no food or water?"

Al looked at him, trying to work out exactly what he wanted. "You are our guest, Mr Knight," he explained, formally. "I'll see about some food for you."

He turned to leave, but Nick stopped him. "Do you have to leave? It's lonely here." Al turned to look at him, suspicious, but there seemed something honest in that statement - honest, and sad - "I've been alone for too long in my life."

Al tried to see what he was thinking, but couldn't. Wearing Sam's face, he couldn't help but look honest. Al sniffed and walked over to the communication panel to order some food. It wouldn't do any harm to be able to keep an eye on this one...

"What vintage blood would you like?" he asked watching for a reaction.

Nick just kept looking at him pleasantly. "I prefer the blood of un-baptised newborns, but virigin blood at this time of day is perfectly acceptable." He watched Al's eyebrows rise alarmed. "Actually, I was thinking of chicken provinciale, steamed baby potatoes, orange glazed carrots and baby peas and something light to drink, perhaps a chablis -- can you recommend something?"

Al glared his response, but recited the request, determined to watch him eat.

Nick smiled at him. "Thank you. It seems like centuries since I had a good meal."

* * *

"Sam?" Al asked gently. "Are you awake?"

Sam's eyes fluttered open, and he groaned. "My neck...." He rolled his head from side to side, shrugging his shoulders to ease the pain. "Why didn't you wake me?"

Al just looked at him. "Just because..." he started.

But Sam talked over him as he got to his feet, stretched and headed upstairs to what he hoped was the bathroom. He felt tacky and need of a shower. His mouth seemed to have a strange, salty aftertaste - somehow thick as if he had been drinking too much. "Has Ziggy given you any idea on what I am supposed to be here for?"

Al appeared in the bathroom where Sam was shrugging his clothes off. He looked into the mirror with curiosity to see the pale body and the dark golden blond hair. It was body of lean strength, but so pale... as if it had never touched sunlight. He looked at his shoulder and cheek, but there was only a barely red mark where the sun had touched him. "He must have healthy skin. He heals well," Sam remarked as if he were talking about someone else. "Does he really have a problem about sunlight.... no, don't answer that. I <u>know</u> he does."

"What do you mean?" Al asked, truly agitated. "What happened?"

"This rare skin disease Nick Knight has...." Sam explained as he rubbed his hand down his cheek, then turning to turn on the water in the shower, and to remove his trousers. "... is like nothing I've ever seen. He feels real pain, but apparently there's little damage done to the skin

tissue...." He stepped into the shower, and Al started to follow, then remembered what he was doing.

"I don't know about that...." he started. "But you're not here for Nick Knight, so don't get too interested in his medical condition."

"Is Nick giving you problems in the Waiting Room?" Sam asked, soaping up his body, amazed that he felt comfortable in this particular body.... his fingers and hands worked up the soap on his skin and it felt like himself for a change. May be they were similar body types, but really, this man was shorter and stockier in places.

"You could say that..." Al conceded. "... the sooner he's gone, the better."

"So, what's the problem?" Sam turned his face to the water, filling his mouth to rinse it, but as he did so and tried to swallow some of the water, he began to gag. Holding the wall, he retched, then finally he cupped some more water to rinse his mouth when it happened again.

Al stuck his head through the shower screen to check on him. "Are you all right?"

Sam turned his head with a look of distaste and nodded without speaking for a moment. "I think he's got more problems than one," he said weakly.

"You're not kidding," Al agreed, lookin at Ziggy's communication box. "But in the meantime, you've got to hurry."

"Why?"

"Nick Knight has a partner, Detective Skanky, who will be shot in the line duty in the next two hours, by a drug dealer who's been selling drugs and sweeties to kiddies in the local school."

Sam's face became hard. "Where?"

"Not far. You've been doing the night duty, and he's been taking the day shift watching the school yard, trying to get enough evidence to get the dealer."

"And...?"

"He's about to meet up with the big boss," Al answered flatly.

"Okay," Sam headed for the bedroom where a long built-in wardrobe showed a long range of clothing, but he just pulled out the first air of jeans and a shirt that would fit.

"Only one problem, Sam."

"What?" Sam snapped, stepping into his jeans, forgetting about underwear for a change.

Al slanted him a look, but didn't remark on it. "Have you looked outside?"

Sam just looked at him, then quickly crossed to the window, pressing the remote control he had found by the bed.

Slowly they opened, spilling light across the bed, making bright, hard stripes. Sam stood looking at it. "I can't go," he said quietly.

"You've got to go. Ziggy says there's a 97% chance that you've got to save Skanky," Al insisted.

"You don't understand." He looked as if fascinated by the rays of sunlight that seemed to have a deadly solidity. He held his hand out tentatively as if to touch the beam. Then he moved his hand in quickly, before he could change his mind.

His scream cut straight through Al. He could almost feel the vibrations shake through him. "Oh God, Sam, what are we going to do?"

Sam was holding his hand watching the skin blister as if he had placed it above a fire, the pain of first contact had almost numbed him. He had snatched his hand straight out, of the beam the shock of contact making him move automatically. Then the pain held him immobile.

He moved to the bathroom again, opening medicine cabinet with his good hand.... but again, like the fridge, it had little. No asprin, or painkiller.... not even mouthwash. A toothbrush and toothpaste sat there, as well as a shaving kit. Not much else. Not even a bandaid.

"What kind of man is this?" he muttered, glancing at himself in the mirror. He reached in for the bottle to one side of the cabinet. Factor 100 plus sun screen. It was a start.

Suddenly determined Sam headed back for the bedroom to sort through the things in the wardrobe. His hand didn't feel as painful, and as he pulled dark gloves on , he no longer thought about it. It was Al who stared in horrorfied fascination as the blisters seemed to heal themselves even as the gloves were pulled on.

"If I'm going to have to go out there in the sun, I'm going to wear enough clothes so that not a single sliver of light will penetrate."

* * *

"The case?" Nick asked. "What interests you so much about the case?"

"The information we have is that your partner is in danger and we are trying to save him," Al supplied, impatent.

"And if I give you the information, you can save Skanky and then what?" Nick asked.

"Then you go back to what you were doing, and Sam can have his body back," Al said not quite truthfully.

"You have no idea, Admiral, just how much I am starting to enjoy this body you have given me."

"Loaned you," Al put in quickly.

"If your Sam doesn't suceed, then I shall have something I have wanted for a long time."

"What's that?" Al asked, not really wanting to know.

"Mortality." Nick savoured the word. It tasted like the food that had passed his lips, creating wonderful sensations on his tongue, before being swallowed. And the wine with its sweet intoxication. He could grow old, and feel the age creep into your bones, until you died. In the fullness of time, you died.

"Are you willing to sacrifice your own partner in order to give up what most people would trade their souls for?" Al argued. Yet, he knew, he would never take on immortality at the price this man must have paid... was still paying.

Nick's face - Sam's face - was showing his indecision, then a blank hardness that was probably habitual with him.

"The person we suspect is..."

* * *

"Will you look at that?" Jack Horner remarked from beside Skanky. Jack was his day-time back-up, but he didn't have Nick's intuition, or reflexes. He'd never admit it - after all he had an image to maintain - and Nick was far too sure of himself as it was... sure of himself, and full of himself, he decided.

"So, do you think the Invisible Man means to help? I know he has a weird kind of skin condition, but that's ridiculous... he looks more like the abominable snowman like that... and in the middle of Summer." Skanky's tone was scathing, but he was alarmed. He knew it had to be important for Nick to venture out in the middle of the day like this... He was also still disbelieving about the severity of Nick's skin condition. He'd thought about different reasons why Nick couldn't venture out during the day and came up with a whole hoast of improbably but interesting alternatives: he was dating a girl on night-shift; he had a second day-time job somewhere; he was actually a lecturer in languages at the University; or a spy; or....

He stepped out of the shadows, looked about and raised his hand, about to get Nick's attention.

Sam searched the area near the school ground.

"How does he get shot, Al?" Sam asked Al urgently, seeming to hear a whole cacophony of noise about him.... How was he going to be able to tell what was actually of danger to Skanky when there was do much sound in the world. He hadn't realised before. Deliberately he used some of his self-control techniques to try and hear <u>through</u> the noise.

"In the back, Sam." He looked around and spotted Skanky heading towards him. "That alleyway over there," he pointed.

Sam focussed to where Al was pointing. He saw the thin rod of a rifle come from the shadows, and could hear the sound of a safety being disengaged.

Skanky had turned to see a long, black car pull up and someone open the door for the dealer under surveillance. He looked back at Horner who was shooting film quickly, and smiled. He crossed back to him in order to call Headquarters with the information, and to try and get backup. As he did so, Sam lept.

He had to describe it as lept.... he couldn't have flew, could he? He seemed to travel the distance without his feet once touching the ground until he was between Skanky and the rife, as the trigger was pulled.

Pain exploded in his chest, but he kept on moving, heading towards the rifle. And it fired again and again, but he didn't fall until after he had taken the would-be assassin out.

Realising that something was happening, Skanky ran for the big car, his gun out and aimed. The dealer tried to climb in, but was pushed from the door, as the car spun out of reach. Skanky didn't waste time regretting that loss. The pictures that Horner had taken would be enough to track that one down. In the meantime, he fell on top of the other, cuffed him, and read him his rights.

He heard the other shots, but couldn't do anything until Horner came to relieve him.

He ran to where Nick lay. He picked up his head and cradled it on his lap. "Nick, are you all right?"

It was hard to tell. Sam's face was completely covered by a balaclava and dark glasses shaded his eyes. His lips were coated with thick zinc cream.

"Okay," Sam wheezed, somehow feeling he would be despite the shots taken at almost point-blank. Skanky was alive. He'd leap now. He had to.

Impatiently Skanky wrenched the glasses from Nick's face, trying to see how he was.

Sam's body arched with the pain and the lids of his eyes immediately started to blister. He screamed with the pain and Skanky shaded him with his body as he shakily put the glasses back.

"I'm sorry, Nick. I'm really sorry. I really didn't realise that that skin condition of yours was so bad. Don't worry, I'll get you help."

"No," Sam groaned, already feeling the pain numb, although his eyes felt stiff with the blistered tissue. "Get me home, please."

"Okay, okay... Though I still think you ought to see a doctor..."

Sam could just make out Al as he bent over as well. He had a feeling that he knew what Nick Knight was now"Does he make it?" he asked him as he started to leap, but already it was too late. He could feel the tremendous rush of time and energy arc through his body as he was drawn away from his host and tossed into the time stream.

"Who makes it?" Skanky asked of the real Nick who had returned.

Al remained only a second longer, fidgeting with Ziggy's communication box. He held the secret of Nick Knight to himself. It frightened him but there was no way he was going to tell Sam, Ziggy, Goochie, Tina or anyone else - they wouldn't believe him in any case. Yet, he'd seen the yellow glow in Nick Knight's eyes and ...

He looked about the waiting room and Sam's body lying quiety, the sheet that covered him moving up and down in his sleep.

At least he was released from Nick Knight's body ... but where to next?

He chewed the end of his cigar, rolling it between his teeth, before pushing it out again with the tip of his tongue.

As he took the cigar between his fingers thoughtfully, he breathed the words:

"Oh boy..."

MADNESS IN THE BLOOD: The Fascination of Vampires

by Shayne C McCormack

It isn't new, of course, this odd interest, that sometimes amounts to delight, in tales about human animals that suck blood from the veins of men, women and children (not to mention various assorted livestock). Whether you call them Children of the Night or the Reborn or Nosferatu, or simply vampires, they've been around - in more ways than one - for a long time.

In 1706, for instance, a gentleman names Charles Ferdinand de Schertz wrote a book titled Magia Posthuma. This work contained the story of a woman who'd been buried in her local village cemetery, only to be seen attacking animals, gashing and choking them, so t hat horses and cows were lathered and exhausted, as if they'd run a hard race. He quotes many other supposed happenings of people dying and returning to life as very unpleasant creatures. And Goethe wrote of the vampire in Die Braut von Korinth.

And Abraham Stoker wasn't the only person writing about blood suckers in the 19th century. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle of Sherlock Holmes fame wrote a story titled The Adventures of the Sussex Vampire; in 1847, Thomas Priest wrote Varney the Vampire. Later authors such as Sheridan Le Fanu wrote Carmilla (which was made into an appalling film called The Vampire Lovers) and some fine writers have tried their hand at it (Robert Bloch, creator of Psycho, wrote that excellent short story The Cloak - if you want to read elegant vampire fiction, find this one). Even Ray Bradbury did a piece called The Man Upstairs.

And all of them have contributed to the myths and legends of the vampire. The waters have been muddied a lot over time, with each author trying to place vampires within their own framework of rules and conditions. But certainly Bram Stoker had a lot to answer for - much of what is assumed today comes of his one novel.

The current wave of interest in vampire fiction was almost certainly triggered by Anne Rice's Interview with a Vampire. There was a considerable gap between this first novel and its sequel, The Vampire Lestat. The following novels came out much more quickly, and in between a whole bunch of other novels (usually nowhere near as well written) popped up.

There has been a number of very odd works on vampires. Richard Matheson, an excellent author who did a lot of work on the original Twilight Zone, wrote a novel titled I am Legend. This book was made into two films; the first with Vincent Price under its original name, and the second was mutilated under the title of The Omega Man, which had nothing to do with vampires. In this work the central character is the only human being left alive and 'normal' after a worldwide disease turns humanity into vampires. He spends his time going around during the daylight hours dispatching the monsters as they sleep - but in the end it seems that he is the monster and the vampires the helpless prey. It's an amazing tale and quite singular.

Fred Saberhagen has done a number of works of science fiction, but he also wrote a series of vampire novels before the current wave started. The first one, The Dracula Tapes, is probably the only humorous vampire novel I've ever read, and is Dracula's story from his own point of view. The other words were more serious (The Holmes-Dracula File, An Old Friend of the Family, Dominion) and not as enjoyable a read to my mind.

Someone who was writing even earlier than Rice is Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, and her vampire, the Comte Sainte Germaine, is as different and almost alien as Rice's vampires. My only real quibble with Yarbro is that she doesn't make Sainte Germaine vampirish enough for my tastes - he's almost like an immortal being who just happens to have some rather weird sexual states. There are at least half a dozen works on Sainte Germaine, who has lived a very long time (I always rember how he started out as average height, but as the human race gets taller through the centuries, he is, in comparison, seen as shorter and shorter. It's a nice touch of authenticity.)

Some other current authors doing vampire fiction include Charles L. Grant (The Soft Whisper of the Dead, a very thin and not very good work); Lee Killough (Blood Hunt and Bloodlinks, the story of a policeman turned vampire); Dam Simmons' Children of the Night, which has a good reputation; P.N. Elrod's 30's vampire and private detective pairing of The Vampire Files, which currently runs to about six enjoyable reads; Barbara Hambly's novel which came out in the English edition as Immortal Blood and is set in England during the Victorian era; Kim Newman had recently come out with a very odd work titled Anno Dracula which concerns the notion that Dracula survived and persuaded Queen Victoria to marry him - he then set about turning the population of Great Britain into vampires; and Tanya Huff's four novel series beginning with Blood Prince, where the couple consists of a woman ex-policeman private detective and a male vampire who writes romances for a living (love the concept!). There are also frequent anthologies including The Ultimate Dracula edited by Byron Preiss with around 20 short pieces by such authors as Anne Rice, Dan Simmons, Philip Jose Farmer, Lawrence Watt-Evans, etc. and Dracula, Prince of Darkness edited by Martin Greenberg with 15 short pieces of varying quality.

There are, of course, many other things coming out, but most of them are pretty appalling. It's far easier to find something bad in the genre than something good. I suppose publishers see it as being similar to romance fiction - as long as the parts work, they figure the readers don't give a damn how well the words are put together.

Then, of course, there are the films and TV series. It was, I think. back in the 60's that the first real television vampire appeared - Dark Shadows with Barnabas Collins, played by Jonathan Frid. It was a poorly made weird fantasy series about an odd fella who turns up at an equally odd country house in the US. It turns out he is a vampire, and his aim is to get cured. The show didn't run very long, and was actually remade as a limited series with Ben Cross playing the part of Barnabas.

Some years ago a movie was made in the US as a pilot for a TV series/ The movie was called Nick Knight but the series didn't eventuate. Then it did, sort of - Forever Knight is a Canadian/US production, which has one season done and another to be done in 1994. It is, to my mind, the best material done on vampires on TV. It has recently commenced on Channel 9 at 12.30 am Thursday morning (Sydney).

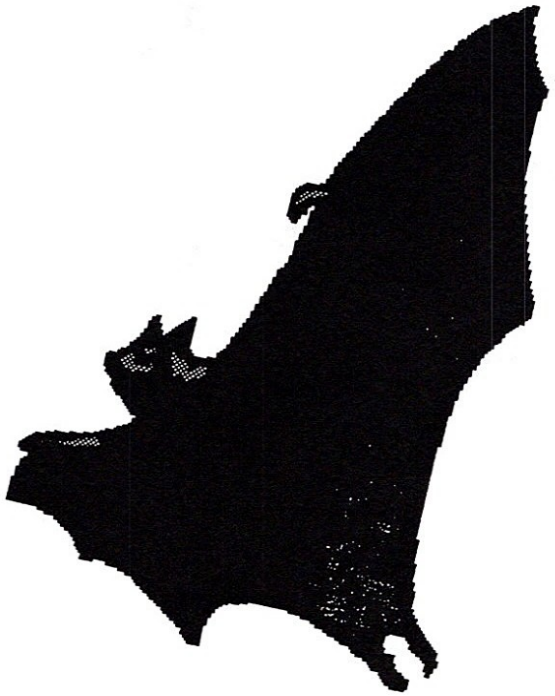
There was a;so a very popular telemovie done some years ago called The Night Stalker, about a vampire stalking Las Vegas. It spawned a TV series about a somewhat obnoxious reporter tracking down stories on the supernatural; the new series The X Files reminds me of it a little, in that the major character is never believed and never quite managed to get proof. But the TVM was quite good, and rated very highly when it was shown, giving you some idea of just how popular vampire stuff is.

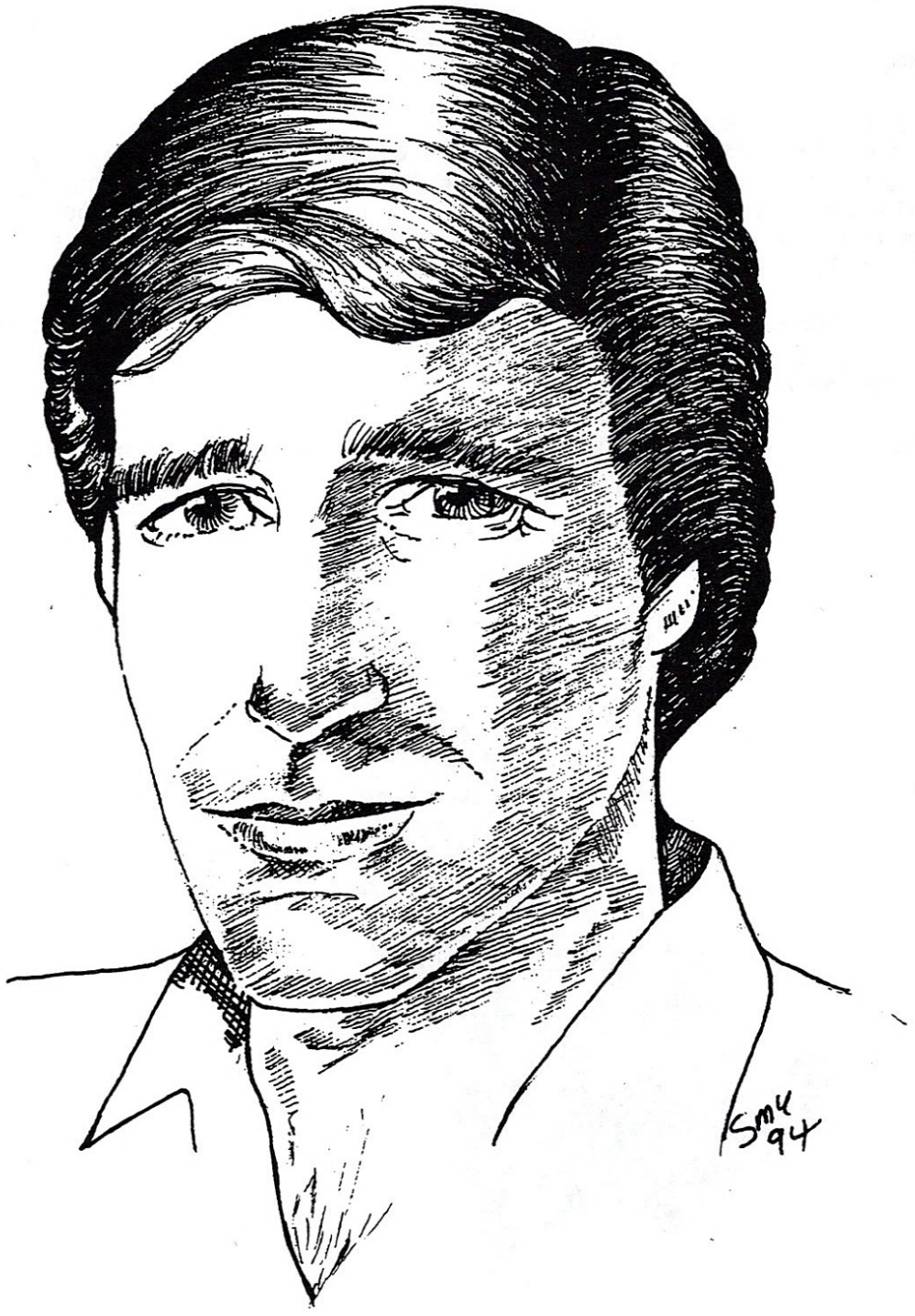
And, of course, there had been heaps of movies. They started in 1922 with Nosferatu, and in the talkies with the original Bela Lugosi Dracula. The Hammer Studios in England produced a whole rash of vampire films in the 60's and 70's, many of them starring Christopher Lee as Count Dracula. And there have been a lot of very odd vampire films. For example, our own Michael Pate starred as (of all things) a vampire gunslinger in Curse of the Undead (made by Universal in 1959) and in 1966 there was that much loved Billy, the Kid v. Dracula (I leave it to your imagination what that one was about).

Then there was Blacula, where the vampire is a black man. And even that fine British actor David Niven had a go at women's necks in Vampire. There have been Asian vampires (Legend of the Seven Golden Vampires), a stage play which was made into a film with Frank Langella playing one of the first sexy Draculas, and an umpteenth remake of the Stoker novel was just produced by Francis Ford Coppola which was very artistic but somewhat unsatisfying. There hasn't been a vampire canary yet, but I expect one done any time now.

And even our old friend Batman has vampirish overtones in the Michael Keaton remake... big and black, with leathery batlike wings, a habit of coming out at night to hunt down evil doers. He doesn't take blood, that we know of...

And now they have Tom Cruise playing Lestat in Interview with a Vampire. Hmmm, whatever next?




SMK
94

SHADES OF GREY

By Timmothy Clarke

Vertigo, disillusionment. An absence of being instantly replaced by another form, another life, another reality...

Desist. All forms of consciousness must be removed from test subject before further alterations can be made. Activate the Zhrinath artifact...

I... I can't see. This is nothing new. But there is something unnatural about the bleak gray that surrounds me. I can hear a voice, stern commanding, so I assume that I am with someone.

My lord, the subject is increasing brain fuctions. Higher areas of learning are fully operational. None have ever survived this far without permanent damage, yet this one seems more than healed.

The gray is slowly forming various shapes. There are two. One seems to be large and powerful. The other small and harmless. I can hear them, and see their outlines, yet I can make no movement.

The infernal shrieking this creature is causing is driving me to distraction. Normally I would welcome such a feast, but now I seek peace. Terminate its essence. I must seek the gateway home.

The tall one leaves. The gray is forming into a more distinct shape. God. This can't be real. The creature in front of me can't exist in any rational state of mind.

Earther. I bring you greetings. My Lord would have one such as you destroyed, yet I do not follow him blindly. I will aid you to join the other terrans in this place. Do not be disorientated by what you see. Many who have crossed the gate feel this way about our world.

"Where are I? What is this place? Who are you?" Sam Beckett demanded as he sat up on the hard bench. He looked around at the triangular room he was in. Glyphs he couldn't recognize surmounted the walls. The creature he addressed was humanoid except for the squid head and the three fingered hands.

Your people shall tell you that. Feel glad that the Overmind didn't desire of your brain. With yours intact, it would have been considered a delicacy. But I shall warn you. In your travels through the gates, never again come to the Mind Flayers.

The creature turned and walked through a wall. Sam hesitated before walking up to it. The metal felt smooth but when pressure was exerted, it parted before his hand. As he passed through the wall a horrific sight awaited him.

The alien landscape that surrounded him was from the nightmares of some demented artist. The proportions and shapes of the buildings were wrong, even to his own abstracted point of view.

The Mind Flayers moved through the concentric streets towards a huge tower in the centre, and Sam saw the occasional person, or some other unidentifiable creature. He hurried to catch up with his host as he reached a huge black wall suspended in light. The Mind Flayer stepped aside and gestured him forward, just as the door to the imaging chamber opened and Al ran in shouting at him to stop.

Again the strange sense of vertigo as nauseating waves of gray smashed at him, threatening to drive him insane as hideous screeching noises grew until an ear piercing whine brought pounding hammer blows to his consciousness. Finally it vanished with the grayness and he found himself lying face down, in a gothic castle. Al stopped shouting as Sam appeared again, and he furiously hit buttons on the hand pad he held.

Sam struggled to his knees as a man in dark black strode into the cathedral like entryway. Al hissed, "You've got to go Sam!" as he furiously pounded on the control pad.

"Not until you tell me what's going on." Sam whispered. The man's boots were inches from Sam's face and Sam looked upwards into a pale white face with brilliant red eyes. The man smiled sadly, revealing sharp canines. Then he stepped back and threw wide his arm.

"Welcome to my castle. It's not much at the moment, I'm afraid. You came at a bad time. Now who are you, to intrude on one cursed with the virus?" The man helped Sam to his feet and cast a cynical glance at where Al stood. Al looked up at him, aware at the perusal and stood stock still as the flame in the eyes held him.

"Lover, when are you coming back to bed?" Came a tired voice from a winding staircase. The man cast a fearful glance behind him and ushered Sam to the door.

"Leave while you can. I can spare you, but if she finds out that meat was here and I let it escape..." He didn't finish the sentence but his eyes did.

Al edged away from the man, and jumped as he bumped into something. Glowing red eyes met him as a giant gargoyle strode around him. Sam looked from his friend to the man. "Leave, Al." He said as he headed towards the door.

"Sam, I can't leave you here..." He didn't finish as the gargoyle grabbed him around the throat and lifted him from the ground. "This is impossible." He gasped as the gargoyle started choking him.

"Stop!" Ordered the man. The gargoyle ignored him and started dragging Al towards the staircase. "Stop, by Bane! I swear I shall destroy you and yours if you do not let the hologram be!" The gargoyle reluctantly relinquished its hold on Al and moved back to its corner, where it screeched a phrase in an alien tongue. "Damn." The man muttered, he turned to Sam. "Use the coding sequence. Get out of here..."

"What is it, Craig?" Came the woman's voice from the bottom of the stairs. "Unable to handle a couple of mortals. Perhaps I should teach you how." The silky voice came into view from behind Craig. The woman wore a long black dress upon which hair that was of the deepest red fell. Two blazing red eyes held Sam in their power as the beautiful woman moved on. She trailed her fingernails up to his throat and gave a soft bite. The pressure increased slightly as the teeth broke through and his blood dribbled down from the wound. She turned her gaze to her lover as she slowly ran her tongue over the salty river, her tongue absorbing the rivulets.

"Sam! Wake out of it. She's a vampire. Ziggy says you have to destroy her!" Al's pleading tone woke Sam out of his daze and he met the gaze of the vampiress. She hissed and

backhanded him across the face, knocking him across the room. He crashed against a wall as the vampiress turned on Al.

She flowed over to him as he tried to open the imaging chamber door and grasped his throat in a vicelike grip. Already bruised tissue started to cut and blister as she squeezed and twisted. Suddenly a hand grabbed her hair and yanked it backwards, pulling strands out. She hissed again as Craig stared into her eyes.

"Listen to me, Raquel. If you do not do as I say, I shall cut your throat and leave you to the wolves. Regeneration would be most painful from the inside of a pack, would you not think?" He pulled her hair tighter as anger twisted his face into a snarl. "I could kill these two if they were not necessary for our plans, my lady. To defeat the Khrinar we shall need the two of them. Let the hologram return to his people with this news and we shall see what their precious psychiatrist has to say."

Raquel let go of Al and Craig threw her across the room into a symbol of a hand that surmounted a wall. She gave a harsh cry as she fell back, scorch marks evident. She took one final look at where the three of them stood, and then fled up the stairs. Craig turned to Al coldly. "Leave at once. Find out all you need to know where you come from. I shall attempt to keep Sam alive, but to do so will require some aid on your behalf. You have my word as a Lord and as a Paladin that I shall not harm him."

Sam looked at Al and nodded. Sam looked one final time as Al shakily opened the chamber door and stepped through. He then looked at where his host stood, watching him coldly. He gestured with his head towards the stairs, and Sam followed him.

Al stumbled from the imaging chamber into the centre where Gooshie jumped up, surprised at Al's bloody entrance. Verbena rushed over with him and started to examine him. "What was going on in there? Something has crashed all the systems except for those running the imaging chamber and Ziggy's libraries." For the first time, Al noticed the lack of lights and sound in the room. He whispered one word, "Vampires." Before sinking into unconsciousness.

He awoke again on a couch with an arm in a sling. As he struggled to stand up, someone pushed him down again. "Take it easy. Until we can get things straightened out, it would be better to keep everyone off the case."

"What about Sam? I need to talk to the guy that he changed bodies with." Al struggled up, and the hazy form sat back. "Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm someone who has direct experience in what's going on. And the person that Sam leaped into is a complete vegetable. No brain activity whatsoever. The only reason why the body is still alive is that it's hooked up into complete life support."

The shape formed into the woman from the castle. The eyes were a normal green and the teeth were perfectly rounded. Al drew back and the woman stood, watching his reaction.

"I can see that you've met Raquel already. Explains what you were muttering. I'm Rachelle, and I'm trying to stop her before she breaches the gate. I'm surprised Sam survived the journey through to the gray realm."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Al said as he sat up. "Where is Sam? Ziggy could locate him but couldn't get a fix on the actual location."

"Sam is currently in a gray zone. All dimensions meet in this one focal point and gateways lead to all the other planes."

"What's that in English, lady."

"It's a place where black and white meet. Sam alone might be able to stop Raquel from tearing the rift open."

"What about Craig?"

"What has he got to do with it?"

"Craig was with this Raquel. He was trying to convince her to let us both live so Sam can help her in her plan."

"Craig and Raquel? Explains what he said about the cause of his problem... You had better help Sam. But take this with you." Rachelle passed Al an Ankh that mirrored the one she wore on a chain. "It should protect you from Raquel... and Craig." She stood, patted his leg and then left. Al rolled off the couch and lit a cigar as he considered the complications that had arisen.

* * *

Sam followed Craig down the stairs through dungeons where pitiful moans and cries of imploring shook him. He heard a baby crying behind one door and stopped. Craig grabbed his arm.

"There's a baby in there." Sam said, trying to pull away from the unearthly strength.

"She is just meat for Raquel." Craig answered, not meeting his gaze.

"And you?"

"I kill the guilty."

"Where have I heard that before. So why do you let her harm the child."

"No one is unguilty. Every human born is guilty of pain and blood. Remember that before you save someone that might become a mass murderer." Craig turned and pulled him down along the corridor to a chapel. The deep obsidian rock seemed to absorb all the light. A pair of coffins made of amethyst stone were on a raised dais in the centre. A body lay on the ground.

Sam ran over to the body and checked it over. "He's dead." He checked the neck. "It seems that your Raquel friend was a little thirsty."

"Hungry." Craig corrected, walking past him to his coffin. He drew a shining blade out of the coffin. He knelt beside the body. "Damn. I warned her never to leave without fixing the bodies." The blade flashed and the head severed. Sam backed away from Craig and made as if to run.

Craig stood and watched. As Sam reached the door, he raised a hand and spoke a word. "Stupakh." A kinetic force smashed Sam backwards into the wall. As Sam slumped he felt an electric shiver tingle through his body and a paralysis held him. He could move his lips with difficulty.

"Why did you do it?" He forced himself to slurringly speak. Craig held the point of the sword to his throat, then relaxed his grip, slipping it to the ground.

"The dead that vampires make by their hunger rise as dark vampires. They are passionate killers. Only those whose condition is caused by having had a certain 'virus' prior to being bitten, those who have the vampire gene, and those who have lived as vampires longer than most will, can survive the darkness of vampirehood, and only then if they are willing to make a change for the better, otherwise they remain a dark vampire. Raquel prefers to suck her victims dry. I just kill them. Which would you consider better?"

Sam tried to speak but a sudden pain gripped him and he felt that he could move again. Craig continued as he replaced the blade in the coffin. "Vampiricy doesn't just happen to bad people. I know many good people who have been cursed such."

"Like yourself."

"I am not a good person." Craig spoke slowly, emphasising the words. "But vampiricy doesn't make you evil. It doesn't make you a plague carrier, if you are careful. You can learn to drink other types of blood. You can even learn to stand faith and purity with time."

"Then why do you stay with Raquel?" Sam asked as he leant back against the wall to support himself.

"She needs a support. She was almost dead from attempting to kill herself when I first met her, long, long ago. I taught her to hunt and to kill to survive. Since then, I was cured. A few months ago, she bit me because her new 'master' wanted to conquer my realm. That single bite was enough to make me a vampire. She had taken the bodily form of my fiancee Rachelle. She still keeps that body. My fiancee was a paladin of singular holiness, and I can no longer stay with her for long periods. I have joined Raquel's master against my own people, including my fiancee. Raquel's a very fragile person, I don't think that she could survive me betraying her."

"So you work behind her back to try to protect the one you love?"

"That's a way to put it."

"Why don't you go back to your own side?"

"I will stay with Raquel until she changes sides. If she wants to stay and try to conquer all I have built, that's her decision. If you can convince her otherwise, good luck. I will not try. She trusts me. Good night." Craig turned and left Sam in the room, closing jade doors behind him, leaving Sam in the crypt.

"What took you so long, Craig?" Raquel's voice came from the bedroom. Craig finished climbing the stairs and stood in the doorway, watching her.

"I was finishing up after your meal, my lady. It is surprising, how little mortals know about our race." Craig replied, as his eyes wandered up and down the visible skin of her back under the sheet. Raquel rolled over, and her naturally gray eyes met his. She smiled slightly and reached out. Craig sighed and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Why do you still try to change our destiny, my love? The powers that be will conquer and we shall rules these realms as husband and wife!" Her eyes glowed slightly and she smiled, revealling her elongated canines.

Craig lightly bit her neck and she kissed him in return. "Raquel. If we stop this bloody war, we can rule this reality uncontended. If you just follow my plan and use the pawns as I suggested, we can fool everyone."

She considered this. "Those two are not enough for the ending of the rifts. How else can you stop this encounter?"

"I have four people in mind. The right kind of stuff, so to speak. So are you willing to sacrifice your honour to rule unopposed? Will you do this for us... for me?"

Raquel licked her fingers and watched Craig with a hint of amusement. "I love you. Of course I will." she said. Craig gently kissed her again, and she raised her throat again to be bitten. "I love it when you do that." She whispered.

Craig answered by switching off the light.

How can we use them to our advantage, my lord?

The vampires are playing their own game, the tool of the other can be used against him. With his help, unknowingly as he will never side with me, we can tear the rifts to my realm open, and both earth and hell shall forever be mine.

But what of the hologram?

He can do nothing against us, yet we can do everything against him...

Al looked over the sidearm he had been given by Rachelle. She stood by him at the door to the imaging chamber.

"I'm going with you."

Al sighed. They'd had this argument before. "There's no way you're going in. I know that you're 'blood tied' or some such business to this Craig person, but it's too dangerous. That's final. Now, how does this gun work?"

Rachelle's hand whipped out, grabbing the gun and instantly the barrel was resting against Al's forehead. "It's quite easy, really. You move this lever here." A disquieting hum started and Al became aware of flashing lights along the side of the weapon. "And you squeeze the trigger." Al shut his eyes and waited. When nothing happened, he opened one, then the other. Rachelle laughed. "Of course, it only affects creatures with incrediably high psionic abilities. To put it quaintly; it fries their brains."

She reversed the gun and handed it to Al. "Still don't want me along. I could order you to take me in, but I would rather that we don't have to resort to that." Al nodded and opened the door.

Sam looked up as Al and Rachelle entered through the glowing white light. "Al, watch out, Raquel's behind you!" Al spun and fired the gun. Rachelle spun and dived as the energy bolt shot over her head. She glared at Sam, as Al relaxed his hold on the weapon.

"If you don't mind. If one more person mistakes me for that cheap bubble head, I'm going to shoot them." She pulled her own gun out of the holster and looked around.

"Al, what's going on?" Sam asked, as he edged towards the hologram. Abruptly he slipped and crashed into Al, knocking him over. "What?"

Al got to his feet and gave a concerned look to where Rachelle was looking through the coffins. He helped Sam to his feet before continuing. "This is Rachelle. She's here to help us. Uh, Sam. Have you been feeling alright lately, you look kind of pale."

Sam slipped and fell against the coffin. A second dizzy spell took him and he knocked the lid off with a crash. Rachelle ran over and held his arms, staring in his eyes. Sam felt a nauseous tingle ran through him and he retched. Rachelle grimaced but kept their eyes locked. Shards of pain pushed under Sam's skin and he howled, frightening himself with the wolf like tone. The bites on his neck started to itch and burn. His eyes rolled upwards as pressure forced it to him. Just when he thought that the pain would never end, he vomitted up black blood and collapsed in a heap, as strength slowly returned to him.

Al looked from him to Rachelle. He walked up to Sam and his hand passed through him. "What did you do?" He whispered to Rachelle as she wiped a mixture of blood and vomit off her gray jumpsuit.

"I removed the virus from his blood system. He was a third of the way to becoming an undead stalker. I simply used my Selena given powers to cleanse him. A pity it was so painful, and messy." She threw the pink satin sheet she had been using to clean herself back into the coffin.

Sam pulled himself up onto a coffin and looked at Rachelle. "So, you're this fiancee person that Craig's been going on about. It's nice to meet someone who can help these people. But who's Selena?" Sam looked at her confused as colour returned to his face.

"Selena is my patron Goddess. She gives me my powers to heal, protect, charm, and destroy. She's also a goddess of beauty."

"I can see that she's got taste." Al said. "Is this her symbol, then?" He asked, holding up the Ankh.

"No, it's a personal symbol that Craig sometimes uses. That one is enchanted to protect the user from magic and violence."

"But what about God?" Sam asked as he sat on the coffin.

"He has no true control over where I come from, but Satan is trying to physically force his way onto the material existance of both our worlds."

"Are you saying that you're an alien?" Al asked from where he sat.

"No. I come from an earth in a different reality. I'm just a normal girl. As normal as anyone under my circumstances could be." She added.

"Well, that's fine, but..."

"What is that holy bitch doing here?! Nuke!" Screamed a voice from the doorway. Rachelle dived over one of the coffins as a white bolt of energy came at her. It surrounded the coffin, which vanished in the blazing energy. Al spun and fired at the door. At least one of the bolt connected as an unearthly scream pierced their ears, sending them to their knees. Suddenly it stopped and Raquel strode into the room. Her dress was burnt along one of the arms where the bolt had apparently hit it. "I am giving you one last chance, child. Leave or I shall destroy you." Rachelle strode forward and stood opposite her clone. Raquel flinched away and raised a hand.

"Stop!" Ordered a voice. Craig walked into the room, his voice calm. At his side were a group of people. There were several Mind Flayers, a person that was catlike in appearance, a dark floating mass, a man with dreadlocks, a mechanoid, a person with pointy teeth and ears, and a man with a metal H emblazoned on his forehead. Craig said, "Fire!" Then he dived aside.

Abruptly everyone drew guns and started shooting at each other. Bolts of energy flew, as well as crossbow bolts, magic and attacking thoughts. After a few seconds it stopped, leaving the man with dreadlocks, the mechanoid, the man with pointy ears and teeth, and the man with the H emblazoned on his head standing. Craig walked over and joined them.

"Well 'Suoki. It appears that you were right after all. I should ask you 'round for a vindaloo, but it wouldn't look good on the ship records." Said the man with dreadlocks.

"Well, Listy. I could be wrong, but we could become rich and famous for this. I can see it now. ARNOLD RIMMER AND COMPANY SAVE REALITY. It'll be a bestseller. We'll make movies, sell dolls and advertising, make millions," said the man with the H

"Hey! Every drooling girl everywhere could see me on video! Keep me with them forever, little Cat dolls, big Cat dolls. The most handsome guy anywhere will be adored by everyone. But since I already am, I'll settle for the babes." Said the guys with pointy teeth.

"Sirs. You are missing the fundamental point. We should make a TV show with you, Mr Lister, Rimmer, and Cat. And of course, the hero, me, Kryten. Isn't that a nice thought." Said the mechanoid.

While the four argued, Craig walked into the blasted room and helped Sam to his feet. "You sir, have witnessed what few people live through. The Crew from the Dwarf have just wasted some of the most powerful supernatural entities this side of Linden. What happened to Al and Rachelle?"

"When you said 'fire', they left."

"Oh."

"Is Raquel dead then?" Sam asked.

A groan answered his query. From the remaining shattered coffin, a white arm raised. Raquel pulled herself up out of the coffin, and looked around dazedly. "Where am I? Who am I?" She asked as she glanced around. Then she fell back, in a faint.

"It's time for you to find out who you were, Sam." Craig said as he led him towards one of the walls. He raised a hand and murmured some words and a mirror appeared. One figure was in it. It was wearing the same as Sam and looked exactly the same, except for one minor difference. It had no face. "Bye, bye." Craig said as he walked towards the foursome in the door, carrying the unconscious vampiress over his shoulder. Sam looked in the mirror one last time as he felt the familiar sensation of a leap take him.

He stood in front of another mirror. A driving pain flashed through his head as something bright reflected off it. He splashed some water in his face, and when he looked up his eyes were a fluorescent green and sharp fangs glinted in his mouth. He jumped back and a normal face looked back at him. Still shaken, he looked through his pockets and found a police badge and an ID card labelled Nick Knight.

He felt vaguelly thirsty so he walked over to the fridge and opened it. Bottles of red liquid faced him. He opened them and sniffed. The scent was overpowering and he took a sip, and almost immediately spat it out again. It was blood. He wiped his hand across his mouth and returned the bottle to the fridge. He felt giddy, for some reason. The windows were closed with heavy metal shutters. Near the table he found a remote and pressed the open button. Sunlight streamed in. Unbearably hot and painful sunlight. Smoke rose from his exposed skin and he covered his

eyes from the painful burning as he hit the close button. He lay down on a couch and fell into a deep sleep.

He awoke at night, to a phone ringing. "Yes, who is this?" He murmured through parched lips.

"Knight. It's Natalie. It's wakey, wakey time. You were meant to be here to pick me up ten minutes ago."

"I'm half asleep. Where am I meant to pick you up?" He asked.

"The police station. Remember. We're going to the public cemetary to find out about somebody that was killed under unusual circumstances. Come on."

Sam finally arrived at the station after an hour of mindless circling. He was almost ravenously hungry now. He understood in part what Craig had meant about the hunger. A woman got in the car with him. He looked at her tiredly. She look concerned. "You been out in the sun again, Nick?" He nodded and fell asleep. He woke when somebody tapped on his arm. They were outside a cemetary. He was refreshed from the nap and strode out into the darkness with the woman behind him. His enhanced vision picked up numerous small throbbing dots around them, that seemed to be following them.

"Here we are, where the body was found. It's been completely dehydrated and crushed. No moisture left in the body at all."

"How do you know that?" Sam asked.

"Not many bodies crumble when you touch them."

Sam nodded. Suddenly a baritone voice sang out and a light flared up. Seemingly hundreds of red shapes charged at them. Big ones, small ones, round ones, flat ones. As they rolled towards them Sam picked up the words as he and the woman turned and ran.

"Attack of the Killer Tomatoes."

End of Part One.

NEXT TIME: Can Sam escape the killer tomatoes? What must Nick be thinking at the moment? Can the Red Dwarf Crew save the day again? What is the Aquaduck going to do about it? What will Craig do about the Aquaduck? Can Sam cure Nick's vampirehood? Can anyone cure Al's addiction to cigars, fast women, and booze? Who asks all these silly questions?

Find out next time in-

NICK KNIGHT 'V' THE KILLER TOMATOES...

BINDING TIES

By Cathy Lynn Goodwin

Steve McGarrett took the call his secretary, Jenny, had put through for him moments before.

"Doctor Rackman? McGarrett. Thank you, I appreciate it. No, I'll bring it back with me. At the nurses' station until two? Fine. See you in about an hour, then. Goodbye."

Just as he replaced the receiver, Jenny buzzed, and he jabbed the call button down. "Yes?"

"A special courier has just arrived, Boss. He has an envelope addressed 'personal' to you."

"Good. Bring it in, please."

McGarrett rose and met his secretary virtually at the door. He took the envelope she held out to him, and returned to his desk. When she had gone, he eased back in his chair and examined the envelope before opening it. On the top left hand corner the return address block identified the contents as coming from the Island Hospital, and in the centre, his name and title were written clearly in a bold hand. He flipped the envelope, sliced it open with a paper-knife, and withdrew the personnel file:

> LAVALLO, Edith Ann. R.N. senior rated. Born Los Angeles, California 5.5.32; educated University Southern California, BS 1954.

The photo attached was stamped with a recent date and he studied the face keenly. Edith Lavallo was no beauty, but her face conveyed compassion, understanding and knowledge. Her clear eyes and wide mouth highlighted a handsome, almost girlish character, which complimented her small stature.

On impulse, McGarrett traced the face with his finger, as if drawing a mental picture to store in his memory permanently. A smile caught the corners of his mouth as he continued to read.

* * *

Jenny had just finished typing a letter when the inner office door opened and McGarrett emerged.

"I'll be gone a couple of hours, love." He looked at his watch. "When's Danno due in?"

"He's on his way now, Boss." She noticed that the envelope was tucked securely under his arm. "Be here in ten minutes or so."

"Fine. Ask him to review the Edwards' file for the HPD briefing tomorrow."

As she nodded he noted that she was smiling in a peculiar fashion, but time forbade him to get into a discussion. Jenny was a tiny pixie-ish woman to those who didn't know her well. She was also a shrewd, extremely efficient secretary. He wouldn't have her with the unit otherwise, and Jenny was prepared to put in as much time as himself if need be - day or night. Nothing escaped her, and he guessed she already knew what was in the envelope. He returned her smile and walked out.

✺ ✺ ✺

McGarrett tooled the brand new black Ford Mercury into the parking bay marked "POLICE ONLY", braked and switched off. Through the windshield, the box-like three storeys of the main hospital wards took up almost all the view. Functional, but somehow not in keeping with the wide-open park land surrounding it. However, he wasn't complaining about the scenery. Just to be able to see it was enough. He took a moment to reflect upon his recent stay at the hospital and about the events which had put him there.

A birthday and surprise celebration had turned to horror and confusion, leaving him blinded as a result. His car had been wired to explode by Masterson, a disgruntled father whose son he had arrested for the brutal assault of a tourist.

Outside, in the Palace parking lot, loaded with gifts from his colleagues, he'd dropped one, and was about to retrieve it when the auto exploded. That dropped gift had saved his life. It had gotten him far enough away from the car as the driver's side door closed, triggering the device.

The panic was immediate when he realised he couldn't see. Danno had been the first one to him, he remembered, and they rushed him to hospital in quick time. He felt nothing save for the incredible pain in the back of the head, and the heat from the burns on his back.

They'd given him expert medical attention, and except for his eyes, began to recover quickly. The possibility of long-term to permanent blindness terrified him, and he couldn't accept the reality of his situation.

He'd carried on like a blind tiger on the loose; no one needed to remind him of that. But he also had to try and cope, knowing that his would-be killer was still out there waiting for another chance to finish the job. That thought had also terrified him, and he didn't want to hang around, an easy target despite his police guard. But his big brave attempt

to leave the hospital had been a farce; a stupid, foolish farce. He'd embarrassed himself and those around him.

Then Nurse Lavallo had taken over. The turning point. Initially he'd resented her - he had always been fiercely independent, and it was so hard to admit to himself that he needed help.

She was not just a voice, but a presence all encompassing. She chided, encouraged, scolded and pushed. She taught him how to get on with a life without sight. She had given him courage and a new understanding. She *was* his life, and he felt a little lost when she wasn't there.

His attempts to get her on a first name basis were always resisted. With Nurse Lavallo it was strictly business, and thinking back, perhaps it had been his fault. His first-up cold shoulder had obviously alienated her, and yet, from her, he'd never felt any animosity.

Indeed, her concern became apparent when Masterson finally struck again, right here in the hospital. They'd been together in the therapy room when confronted, and the man had a gun. By putting her own life at risk, Lavallo hit the lights, and that had given him the advantage. It was a brilliant stroke. Masterson could no longer depend on his eyes, while he, himself, had learned (if only a little) to be without them.

Using the techniques Lavallo had taught him he was able to corner the man and subdue him until Danno, Chin and Kono came to his aid. And that had closed the book on Masterson.

With the threat over, he felt he could relax, and maybe because of it, (he'd never know for certain) his eyesight began to improve rapidly. Even then Lavallo's daily attendance was something he eagerly awaited and never took for granted. He knew that her time with him was becoming more limited as further duties intruded.

Several times he tried to get her to talk about herself, and although on a couple of occasions she almost opened up, she would pause to re-think, then invariably swing the conversation back to him. So he talked about the sea and time spent in the Navy. She wanted to know about Five-O, and being a cop. Nurse Lavallo was a very good listener. And, oddly, he felt he could talk to her; *really* talk to her. He found it easy to tell her things he'd not been able to with others: likes; dislikes; goals in life; his affection for his colleagues ... and the fear he harboured that he may have to come to terms with being blind for the rest of his life.

Ironically his sight returned just as suddenly as it had been taken from him. On that day, he'll never forget, he turned to the sound of footsteps entering his room. The fuzz began to clear then and there. An absolute knockout met his eyes, and somehow he wasn't all that surprised when the nurse explained that her name wasn't Lavallo.

It was the phone conversation which bothered him. Lavallo rang to wish him good luck because she had learned he was leaving the following day. He wanted to see her before he left, but she hesitated, and said she was in surgery and wasn't sure of her schedule. (In fact he now knew she'd been at the nurses' station outside.) It took all his persuasion just to get her first name from her. Then she'd hung up. The rejection had been like a physical blow, and he was at a loss to understand. Just like that Nurse Lavallo was no more.

For four days he'd played along; tried to get back into business and put it all behind him. There was a load of old cases pending and new ones coming up all the time. But the truth was he couldn't concentrate ... it didn't seem to matter. Nothing mattered. He couldn't forget.

✷ ✷ ✷

McGarrett picked up the envelope from the seat, eased his frame out of the car, and made his way into the building. His first stop was the Records Department, and they were expecting him. They took the file without questions. Next, the doctor's office for his appointment, and Dr Rackman checked his eyes thoroughly.

"Well, there doesn't seem to be any problem there, Mr McGarrett, but I'd like you to continue the medication until it's completed. All right?"

"Anything you say, Doc."

"You've made a splendid recovery."

"Thanks to you."

Dr Rackman smiled. "I'm flattered, but I can't take the credit. You were a handful at first, but once you settled down the recovery hastened itself. Your good physical fitness helped, of course."

McGarrett got to his feet and shook hands. Unsmilingly he said: "Tough as nails, right Doc?" It was a plainly rhetorical question, not requiring an answer. He knew all too well how stupid a term it was. It was so far from the truth.

"If you have any problems," Dr Rackman explained, "don't hesitate to call."

"I will. Thank you."

McGarrett left the office at a brisk pace. He needed no directions; he was no stranger to Island Hospital. He'd spent over six weeks at the place only last year as a result of gunshot wounds, and one or more cases had brought him within these walls. As he walked, sounds and smells were powerful reminders of his so recent admission.

The nurses' station lay straight ahead and he slowed, rubbing wet hands against his trouser legs. He couldn't remember when he ever felt this nervous. A nurse was there all right. Her back was to him, but she turned briefly without noticing him and he was able to identify her.

His heart pounding, he approached the desk, a flood of thoughts flashed through his mind and for once he was quite uncertain of what he was going to say. The desk offered some support as he leant against it, hurriedly trying to form an appropriate sentence in his mind which wouldn't make him seem an idiot. Lavallo's back was still to him as she worked through the large pile of patient records. The familiar light scent of her perfume sparked an instant recall, and he closed his eyes for a second, savouring it.

She had turned by then and was staring at him open-mouthed.

He suddenly felt warm, secure and the nervousness disappeared. He smiled. "Perception and memory, Miss Lavallo. Isn't that what you always said?"

Edith Lavallo tried to keep the emotion from her face, but her eyes registered utter joy - there was also a hint of tears.

"Yes, Mr McGarrett, that's what I said."

He faltered then, uncertain how to proceed. "Edith ..." and actually went to take her hand; thought better of it, however. The gesture was not lost on her.

"It's all right," she explained. "You're just in time, really." Her tone was forced conversational. "I'm leaving for the mainland early tomorrow morning."

"Leaving?" It was a shock; unexpected.

"Yes, I've come to the end of my stay here. By Monday, I'll be back at Good Samaritan."

Then it dawned on him. It had been in the file: "visiting RN, visual impairment rehabilitation, 12 months". He'd read the words and had failed to take the meaning. Now he understood the awful truth.

"Home to Los Angeles?" It was a city he had long since abandoned.

"Yes. I'll miss the islands. I've met so many wonderful people here." Her eyes were steadily on his as she said it, then she glanced at her watch: two o'clock, and during the awkward silence the shift nurse came to relieve her.

McGarrett fell into step behind Lavallo and they walked the corridors together for the last time. Very little was said, though the desire to talk was obvious. He resisted the strong temptation to take her elbow as she had once instructed him to do.

The journey took them down to the ground floor, out of the building and into the parking lot. A slightly patched up white VW beetle stood shaded under a single palm tree. Nurse Lavallo unlocked and opened the driver's side door. McGarrett closed it almost immediately.

"First time I did that after I got out, I felt sick," he admitted.

She nodded. "That's understandable. The last time you closed a car door, the vehicle exploded on you. It's association by action. You'll lose the anxiety in time."

She turned to open the door for the second time, but he took her shoulders, preventing her from doing so.

"Edith," he said quickly, and directly to the point, "'thank you' seems so inadequate."

She squeezed his arm. "You've already thanked me - you bothered to come back."

"I won't forget you." His tone was urgent. He felt this was going all wrong; that he was making a ham fist of it.

Lavallo was philosophical from long experience. "Yes, you will. I'm just a crusty, hard-boiled floor nurse after all."

He shook his head and smiled. "And I'm just a cynical, hard-bitten, emotionless cop."

Each knew that both descriptions were far from the truth. The unusual circumstances of their coming together had stripped away the facades often built to protect the private face. For McGarrett moreso - forced into coming to terms with such a debilitating condition and having to depend on the patience, understanding and generosity of another. Lavallo had given him that and so much more. No, he would never forget.

For Lavallo, McGarrett had been the latest of many patients she'd been assigned to, and she'd been involved in rehabilitation for many years. He had been difficult at first, it was true, but once it became apparent he would have to rely on her guidance and expertise, he taxed her skills to the limit. He was demanding, eager, willing and tireless it seemed. He would work all day and still be ready for more.

At first he was merely another stubborn patient, incapable of accepting his affliction, and she was a professional, used to keeping her charges at a healthy 'impersonal' distance. Sure, he was tall, strong and good-looking, but she'd had those before, too.

Lavallo found this professional gap diminishing, oddly, not by his considerable strengths (like dealing with Masterson), but by what may be termed his weaknesses. She remembered his fumbling, clumsy insistence to bathe and dress himself; his comedic 'reading' from an upside-down book of poetry obviously committed to memory. (In fact she found him to be an unexpected source of subtle humour.)

What endeared her the most, however, was an incident she was never meant to witness. They'd been down to the therapy room where he'd put in solid hours of productive work. They had returned to his room afterward, and she left to attend a call. Her return had been unnoticed. McGarrett had come across the vase on his bedside table, extracted one of the flowers by touch and tested the fragrance. He then sat on the edge of the bed, rolling the stem in his fingers, as if examining the flower in its minutest detail. The realisation that perhaps he may never again be able to see the beauty of a flower or anything else, brought with it the tears. He'd covered his eyes and cried, and feeling like an intruder, she withdrew as quietly as she had entered.

And now in the present, and from those same blue-grey eyes, Lavallo found offered an unguarded honesty - and something else: past hurt and pain endured in silence. Wanting him to know she understood, she touched his cheek.

His arms went round her then and held her firmly, drawing her against his chest. She lay there, fighting back school-girl tears. He rested his chin on her head in an affectionate gesture, and he felt her hands rub his back. They held one another in silence until he asked: "Will I ever see you again?"

She didn't reply immediately, reluctant to let the moment go. Finally, she said: "Whenever you close your eyes, Steve."

He eased her upright and bent to kiss her briefly. Flushed, she drew back, turned, opened the door and got into the car. She drove away without looking back.

✹ ✹ ✹

At 7:05 am precisely, on a fine, clear, picture-postcard morning, United Flight 28 for Los Angeles and Chicago, rose into the sky in a powerful surge of thrust, ten minutes behind scheduled departure time.

Half a mile away, on the east side of the airport, the black Mercury came to an abrupt halt near the rear gate of the runway Maintenance Vehicle Yard and McGarrett got out quickly. He had to shield his eyes against the early morning glare as the Boeing swung high, into a tight turning arc.

There were a thousand things he could have said and done. He could have disregarded her prophetic words: "You know how these hospital relationships don't seem as important when you get home." The implied, 'don't push it, it's not meant to be' warning was not lost on him. Knowing her to be right didn't make it any easier. He could have broached the issue with her, if only to satisfy himself that he had tried - for them both.

But it was all too late.

With a growing emptiness, Steve McGarrett could do nothing but watch as Edith Lavallo flew out of his life.

LETTERS

Linda, PO Box 242, WOY WOY: It's been so long since I wrote you a proper letter, I don't know if I told you that I finally got to see the four 'missing' episodes of ALIEN NATION. (One wonders *why* they weren't screened in the first place.) But Channel 10 came to light with them in the small hours of the morning, with no warning and in the non-rating period at that. This makes no sense whatsoever, given the mega-hype they gave the series when they screened the rest of it earlier.

Anyway, I really only got to see them by a fluke. I spotted ALIEN NATION on at 12:30 in the morning, and saw that it ran for about 3 hours. I thought it was the movie which wasn't a patch on the series. But I thought I might as well tape it to watch the next day as I might appreciate it better the second time around. So I set the VCR and went to bed. But a neighbour was being noisy and I couldn't get to sleep. I heard the VCR go off at 12:30 (TV/Video is in the bedroom) and, as I had no hope of going to sleep, I thought I may as well turn on the set to have a look at this. Imagine my surprise and delight when it turned out not only to be episodes of the series, but ones that had not been shown before. Suddenly, I was wide awake!!

Well can I understand why everybody is furious over the way the series 'ended' - I use inverted commas because there were so many things left up in the air, that it could hardly be called an end. Several vital points were unresolved. No doubt some fan will write a proper ending to this story. Pity it won't go to air. So often these things are left to the fans to sort out, because the networks couldn't care less.

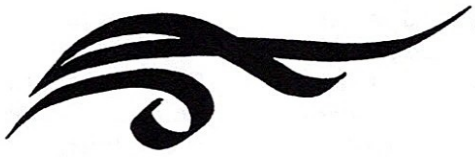
I hope Channel 10 will repeat the whole series, but I doubt they will, given what they did with the last four episodes. There's some things I'd love to see again, like the episode where they found some religious relic that was "the whole of Teckton" in a box. The final sequence of that, a matte shot showing a scene of their home planet, would have been spectacular. But at the time, all I had was a 12" B&W set. I fear something would have been lost in the translation!

But I'd especially like to see the episodes which dealt with George's pregnancy, from the hand over of the pod to the delivery. That whole idea was priceless, and perfectly plausible. Sea horses do this, so do pipe fishes, why not people! I reckon the newcomers have got a great set-up with that. Why should women get lumbered with the whole burden? Let the men suffer too! They might not be so keen to start the whole proceedings going if they personally had to cope with some of the awkward and uncomfortable consequences!

QUANTUM LEAP had a marvellous high-heel-on-the-other-foot episode too. Gratifying to see a bloke on the receiving end of the kind of innuendo and sexual harassment that most women have to put up with at some time or another. About time the men got to see what it feels like. Though I couldn't get what Sam was on about calling women's clothes "a torture rack you can wear". I don't see what's so dreadful about any of it and I am old enough to have worn proper stockings and corsets/suspender belts. No big deal. Though I heartily agree about the stilettos. They *are* diabolical things. Those pointed toes can create bunions, and it is asking for trouble to try to balance your whole weight on a heel so narrow. The real cute part is that those same shoes are back in fashion some 30 years later. But not with me!

But I don't know if you've been following QUANTUM LEAP. I like it because as Sam 'becomes' a different person each week, we get many different points of view, and it's always helpful to try to see things from another PoV. I began writing a story based on the series. But had to put it aside when I became so ill. I've since found that it was probably just as well I did. Apparently I second-guessed the writers. In the season just aired in American, there are two episodes which closely follow the two main points of my story. Not much good trying to finish the yarn now, as it would look as if I'd just done a re-write of what had already been shown on tv, even though those episodes haven't been seen out here yet. It's a pity because what I wanted to do with the story was to have Sam experience what it is like to be handicapped. As someone who has suffered a lot of ill health and various disabling problems, I figured I could give an insight into what it is like via Sam, if he was to Leap into the life of someone who is handicapped. One thing I wanted to shown is that it can happen to anybody. Nobody has a magic talisman that can protect them from a

crippling injury or a disease that can turn them into an invalid. It seems a lot of people go into denial when they are first diagnosed with something that is life-threatening or disabling. The theory is that they have gone through life thinking "It can't happen to me". Funnily enough, I don't think I ever felt that way. Possibly because I grew up with asthma myself and I had a very disabled father.

In the story I wanted to show Sam in the process of going through the rehabilitation system as I did. It may have improved, but in the early 70s when I was involved with it, it was downright diabolical. Perfectly pointless, a lot of people who were undergoing job re-training no one would hire anyway. The job training was very limited. The system took no account of a person's interests, talents or desires, nor even of an established career or any previous work experience. The choice was office work or factory work. That's all basically. Those on factory work were usually severely mentally retarded. But even the office procedures classes were geared to those with a very low mentality. So it was all at a very basic level and very frustrating for anybody with normal intellect to be held back in this way. Many of us had physical disabilities, but unimpaired IQ, and that was the worst of it, the staff treating us all as if we were retarded. Local people around the Centres also treated us that way. It's incredibly insulting and demoralising. I know of one girl who ended up committing suicide because she couldn't take it anymore. She was having enough trouble coping with the fact of suddenly being a paraplegic, but to be denied her chosen career, teaching, and treated like a complete imbecile as well was more than she could stand.

Anyway, the story is passé now, not just because of the episodes aired in America, but because my story doesn't gel with what I now know about the series. The reasons are too long winded to go into, but basically I cannot reconcile my story with some of the things the writers have established in the series.